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BRITISH AUTHORS
TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

VOL. 2979.

THE RED HOUSE MYSTERY.

BY THE
AUTHOR OF "MOLLY BAWN."

IN ONE VOLUME.

LEIPZIG: BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ.

PARIS: C. REINWALD & CIE, 15, RUE DES SAINTS-PÈRES.

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THE
RED HOUSE MYSTERY.

A NOVEL.

BY

MRS. HUNGERFORD,

AUTHOR OF

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LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1894.



THE RED HOUSE MYSTERY.

CHAPTER I.

“The hatred of those who are most nearly connected is the most inveterate.”

“O souls, in whom no heavenly fire is found,
Fat minds, and ever grov’ling on the ground.”

It stood on the top of a high hill—bleak, solitary. In winter all the winds of heaven raved round it; in summer the happy sunshine rarely touched it. It was, indeed, hemmed in from brightness of any kind by a dense row of cypresses that grew before the hall door, and by a barren rock that rose perpendicularly at the back.

On clear days one could get from this cold house a grand view of the valley below, nestling in its warmth, and from the road that ran under it people would sometimes look up and wonder at the curious colour of the Red House—such a dark red—sombre, like blood.

It was a bleak house at all times, but to-day it showed itself singularly dull. A light rain was falling—

light, but persistent; and the usual charming gaiety of an early May morning was drowned in tears. The house looked drearier than ever, in spite of its grand proportions. But no amount of walls can make up for a dearth of Nature's *bijouteries*—her shrubs, her trees, her flowers.

The Red House had no flowering parterres anywhere, no terraces, no charming idyllic toys of any sort, no gracious gardens full of heavenly sweets, wherewith to charm the eye. Nothing, save one huge elm upon the barren lawn, and the dark, gloomy row of cypresses—those gloomiest of all dear Nature's gifts—standing in funeral procession before the hall door. They had been there when Dr. Darkham took the place ten years ago. He had thought of removing them, but on second thoughts had let them alone. Somehow, he told himself, they suited his *ménage*.

Indoors the day was, if possible, more depressing than outside! May should be a lovely month, but months do not always fulfil their obligations. This May day, as I have said, was full of grief. Rain in the morning, rain in the afternoon, and rain now again when evening was descending.

In the morning room, lounging over a low fire, sat Mrs. Darkham, the doctor's wife, a big, coarse, heavy-looking woman—heavy in mind as in body. Her hair, a dull brown streaked liberally with grey, was untidily arranged, stray locks of it falling about her ears. She was leaning forward, staring with stupid, small, but somewhat vindictive blue eyes into the sorry glow of the fire, and her mouth looked as though she were dwelling on thoughts unkindly. It was a loose mouth,

and vulgar. The woman, indeed, was plebeian in every feature and movement.

The room was well furnished, that is comfortably, even expensively furnished, but it lacked all signs of taste or culture. It was not unclean, but it was filled with that odious air that bespeaks carelessness, and a want of refinement. The tables had been dusted, but there were few ornaments on them—a copy of Wordsworth so closely leaved as to suggest the idea that it had never been opened—another of Shakespeare in the same condition, some sea-shells—and *no* flowers.

This was not all the room's contents, however. On the hearthrug—squatting—foolishly playing with the cinders in the grate, sat a boy—a terrible creature—deaf and dumb and idiotic. It was the woman's son—the son of Dr. Darkham, that clever man, that learned scientist!

He sat there crouching, mouthing, his head protruded between his knees, playing with the cinders, making passes at the fire with his long fingers. He was sixteen, but his face was the face of a child of seven. His mind had stood still—his body, however, had developed. He was short, clumsy, unwieldy; but there was strength—enormous strength—in the muscular arms and legs. The face vacant, without thought of any kind, was in some remarkable way beautiful! Its very beauty seemed to add to the horror of it. He had inherited his father's dark eyes—all his father's best facial points indeed—and etherealized them. If his soul had grown with his body he would have been one of Nature's greatest products, but his soul lay stag-

nant and the glorious dark eyes held nothing, and they were vacant also—and wandering.

His figure was terrible—short and broad. His brain had never grown, and the body had ceased to grow *upwards* at twelve. It had only broadened. He had now the appearance of a boy of that age, but the strength of his real years.

The mother sat in the lounging chair looking into the fire, the boy sat on the rug. Neither of them were doing anything. Suddenly the door opened.

The woman started and looked round. The poor creature on the rug still played with the cinders.

“Oh, you!” said Mrs. Darkham. Her husband had just come in.

“Yes. I am going out, I want a stamp.”

“You’ll find ’em on the table, over there,” said his wife, sullenly. Her voice was guttural, vulgar. He had learned to dread the sound of it, to revolt from it. Of the same class as she was, *he* had risen out of it, whilst she—

“So you’re goin’ out again,” said she, taking up the poker and stirring the fire into a blaze. As she did so, a hot coal fell on the idiot’s fingers, and he threw himself backwards with a hideous howl.

“What is it? my darling, my lamb!” The woman went on her knees, and caught the unwieldy mass of humanity to her, with loving arms. After all, hopeless, monstrous as he was, he was her child. It had been but a slight burn, and after awhile the turmoil subsided. Mrs. Darkham rose from her knees, and the idiot went back to his play amongst the cinders.

“I believe you’d see him burnt alive with joy,” said

she, turning to her husband, a great animosity within her eyes.

"Your beliefs are so numerous and are always so complimentary that it is hard to reply," said Dr. Darkham, with a slow smile.

If *her* glance had betrayed animosity, his betrayed a most deadly hatred.

"Oh! there; you're at your sneers again," said she, shrugging her ample shoulders. "So you're going out this wet day. Where?"

"To," slowly, "visit the sick."

"Same old answer," said she, trying to laugh contemptuously. "What you mean is—only you haven't the courage to say it—that you're going to Rickton Villa."

"I daresay," with admirable composure, though his heart was beginning to beat, "that I shall call in there on my way home to see Mrs. Greatorrex."

"Mrs. Greatorrex!" She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and peered at him insolently. In this position the detestable disorder of her gown became more apparent. There was a rent in the shoulder, and lower down a bigger one still, through which some of her under garments were showing. The idiot noting her change of position, had ceased his play with the cinders, and was now sitting cross-legged looking up at her, his vacant mouth half open.

"Mrs. Greatorrex, or her niece, eh?"

"I am not aware that Miss Nesbitt requires the services of any doctor. Where are those stamps?"

"No? Doesn't she? You seem as blind about her, as you are about the finding of them stamps. And so

it is Mrs. Greatorex you go to see? Three times a week? She pays you, I suppose?"

"Not now. Feeling herself better, a little time ago, she told me to discontinue my visits. But I dislike leaving a cure half finished. So I told her I should still call occasionally; she is not very well off, as you are aware." He said all this with the dry business-like air of one who felt he was bound to speak, but then would do it as concisely as possible.

"She is well enough off to treat me as a nobody. Me! The wife of the man whose visits she accep's for nothing. She, a pauper, and me who can ride in my carriage. Why, she wouldn't raise her eyes to mine if she could 'elp it. Can't see me sometimes, she can't. And so she's taking your time and your advice for nothing! And you give them, knowing how she treats your wife!"

The word wife, so incessantly insisted on, seemed to grind his very soul. Yes, there she was, sodden, hideous, irredeemable, and—his wife!

"She is not well off, as I have told you; but she has a certain standing in the neighbourhood. And it is not well for a doctor to quarrel with those around him."

"Hypocrite!" said the woman, in a dull but furious way. The very stolidity of her made the outburst the more remarkable. "Don't you think I see into you? Don't you think I know you? That I haven't known for the past six months the reason of your visits to the villa."

"Put an end to this," said the Doctor, in a slow, cold voice. "Are you mad?" His dark eyes glowed.

They rested strangely on her as though dwelling on a half-formed thought.

He was a tall, singularly gaunt man, but very handsome. There was a want of breeding in the lower part of the face that bespoke his origin, but certainly there was no want of power in it. The jaw was full of strength and repression.

The deeply set eyes were brilliant, and dark as night. As night, too, unfathomable. The mouth was fixed, cold, determined, and suggestive of cruelty. The brow was broad and grand. He was about forty-five, and in manner was suave, low-voiced and agreeable. Education and resolution had lifted him from his first surroundings to a plane that made him level with those with whom he now desired to mix. But all his suavity could not conceal the fact that he would be a bad man to fight with—that he possessed an indomitable will that would drive all things before it, till it gained the object of its desire.

“Mad! Don’t think you’ll make me that. I tell you again and again that I know well why you visit at——”

He turned upon her, and with an imperious gesture stopped her.

“How dare you speak so of——”

“Miss Nesbitt?” She laughed aloud as she interrupted him.

“No. *Of me!* Of course I know what you mean. But am I to give up all my patients to satisfy your detestable jealousy?”

“*My* jealousy! Do you think *I* am jealous of you?” said his wife, with a furious glance. “’Pon my word,

you must think a lot of yourself! Why, who the deuce *are* you, anyway? Tell me that! You married me for my money, and glad enough you were to get it. You, a beggarly medical student, without a farthing to bless yourself with, when I fell in with you. And now I'm not good enough for you, I suppose. It's in the gutter you'd be to-day but for me."

She poured out the terrible torrent of invective in a slow heavy rumbling way; whilst he stood silent, motionless, listening. It was all so true! And her hideous vulgarity—that was true too. It would never alter. She would be there always, clogging him, dragging him down to her own level. All his efforts to raise himself would be in vain. He was of her own class, but he had risen from the ranks through sheer determination helped by an intellect of no mean order, whilst this woman whom he had married when life was yet an unopened volume, had stood still. She was to-day as uneducated and idealess as when at the age of twenty-two he married her for the sake of her money; and now, besides all that, she was hideous and old—older than himself in appearance. Quite an old woman!

And then the child!

CHAPTER II.

The sacred love o' weel placed love,
Luxuriantly indulge it,
But never tempt the illicit robe,
Though naething should divulge it.

I waive the quantum o' the sin,
The hazard o' concealing:
But, oh! it hardens a' within,
And petrifies the feeling!

DR. DARKHAM'S eyes turned to the hearthrug, and then turned away again hastily. He loathed to look upon this, his firstborn and only child. He shrank with horror whenever he saw him. Physical deformity was an abomination in his eyes, beauty a thing to worship. Thus his only child was a living torture to him.

To the mother, the unfortunate idiot was something to love. She had waited many years for him. He was the only fruit of her womb, and an object of adoration—but to the father he was loathsome.

The child when born had seemed perfect, but time had proved him deaf and dumb, and, worse than all, devoid of intellect; without a single idea, save indeed, an overpowering love for his mother. A clinging, unreasoning love, that knew no bounds.

For his father, the unhappy mute felt nothing but a settled, and often openly shown aversion.

His wife had recovered her breath and was still

hurling accusations and sneers at him. He had grown accustomed to let her rave, but now something she said caught his ear, and made him turn to her sharply.

"You are getting yourself pretty well talked of, I can tell you."

"Talked of? What?"—sternly—"do you mean?"

"Right well you know. They are talking about your attentions to that minx at the Villa—that Miss Nesbitt."

Darkham's eyes suddenly blazed. There was fury in them as they rested on her, yet his voice was studiously low and quiet as he spoke.

"Who has dared to talk of Miss Nesbitt with disrespect?" asked he.

"Oh, law! You needn't make such a fuss about it, even if she is your dearie-o. But I can tell you this, Darkham, that people are talking about you and her, all the same. And why shouldn't they? Why, you never take your eyes off her."

"Be silent, woman!" said he, savagely, coarsely; now and again his own birth betrayed him. "Who are you that you should speak to me like that?"

"I am your wife, anyway," said she, with sullen force. She was not silenced or unnerved. She had a will of her own, dogged, slow, that nothing could touch or move.

"Ay! My wife!"

The look that accompanied his tone should have frozen her, but she only laughed.

"I know, I know," she said, wagging her hideous fat head at him. "You would undo it all, if you could. You would cast me out, like Hagar, and marry your

Sarah instead; but"—with slovenly triumph—"you can't. You can't, you know. I"—with a hideous leer at him—"am here, you see; and here I'll stick! You wish me dead, I know that, but I'll not die to please you."

(If she had only known.)

She looked up at her husband out of her small, obstinate eyes—looked at the tall, handsome, well-dressed man whose name she bore, yet who was so different to her in all ways. And he looked back at her!

A strange smile curled his lips.

"Wishes don't kill," said he, slowly. His voice now was soft, refined—but brutal!

"Good for me," returned she, with a hoarse chuckle, "or I wouldn't be long above ground. I know you! And as for that girl down there," she paused, then went on with a malicious intonation, "you may as well cease your funning in that quarter. I hear she's as good as engaged to that young fellow who took up Doctor Fulham's practice three months ago. Dr. Dillwyn."

"A very suitable match for her," said Darkham, after a second's pause, that contained a thousand seconds of acute agony. He spoke coldly, evenly, he had always a hold upon himself. He laid a hand suddenly upon the table next him, however, as if glad of a support of some kind.

"Yes." She looked disappointed; her spleen had desired a larger fulfilment of its desire. "Suitable, indeed. For both are paupers. But, for all you're so quiet, I don't believe you like it, eh? Dr. Dillwyn, you know, and you——"

"I wish sometimes you would forget me," said he. He was livid.

"Ha, ha, ha!" She flung herself back in her chair, and laughed aloud, her hatefully vulgar laugh. "For once in all our lives we are agreed. I wish that, too. But I can't, you see, I can't. You're always there—and I'm always there!"

"You! you!" Darkham took a step towards her, his face was convulsed. "You," he muttered, "always you!" his voice, his gesture, were menacing.

The idiot on the hearthrug, as though gathering into his poor brain something of what was going on between his father and his mother, here writhing round upon the rug, threw himself upon the latter. He embraced her knees with a close soft clasp. He clung to her. Every now and then he glanced behind him at his father, his strange eyes angry, menacing. His whole air was one of protection; short barking cries came from him, terrible to hear. One could see that he meant to shield her, in his own dumb, desperate way, from some threatened harm.

Mrs. Darkham bent down to him, and caught the beautiful soulless face to her bosom, breathing upon it, sweet, reassuring words. The idiot mouthing, slapped her, quietly, incessantly, on the shoulder. There was evidently a sort of *rapproch* between the mother and the afflicted son. Darkham watched them—the mother's heavy coarse endearments—the boy's vacant affection, with his mouth open—and from them presently Darkham turned away with an oath. A shudder of disgust ran through him. "Great heavens! what a home."

His wife had looked up for a moment, and had

seen the disgust. It was fuel to an already very hot fire.

"Go!" cried she, violently. She had the boy's head pressed to her breast, keeping his eyes against her that he might not see her face, perhaps—which now was frightful. "Go! Leave us! Go where you are welcome! Leave us! Leave your home!"

He looked back at her.

"My home!" He paused, but always with his eyes on hers. "My home is a hell!" said he.

He went out then, closing the door softly behind him. He had studied softness, and the lowering of tones, and the suppression of feeling for a long time. He had compelled himself to be a gentleman, in outward form at all events, and so this movement came easy to him.

But when he had stepped into his brougham, he gave himself full sway. As the wheels rolled over the gravel his thoughts surged and raged within him.

That dull illiterate creature, why had he ever married her? What cruel fate had driven him to such a marriage? And for ever that marriage would endure. Trampling him down; destroying him; clogging his career.

Some men got rid of their wives. But that was when kindly Providence stepped in, and Death took them away. But this woman, without feeling, sentiment, or beauty, even Death would not deign to touch her.

Death!—Death! If he were only free.

All at once the face of a young girl rose before him. It stood out clear and tranquil from a detestable background—not like a dream, a thought, but sweetly,

definitely. The eyes, the hair, the lovely mouth, all were there. They seemed to sit there before him, embodied in the brougham.

Darkham flung himself back and covered his eyes with his hand, as if to blot out the too, too lovely apparition. But it would not go. It stayed. The sweet eyes always smiling, the lips a little parted.

What was it that woman, that human devil, had said about her? That she was thinking of—that she was in love with that young Dillwyn? Pshaw! That boy!

Here the brougham stopped at the gate of a narrow but pretty entrance, beyond which a gravelled path led to a small but perfectly appointed house. Dr. Darkham stepped out of his carriage, and entering the hall, followed the servant into the drawing-room beyond, and into the presence of the gentle spectre, who had possessed his thoughts during his short drive.

She stood at the end of the room, bending over some flowers she was arranging, and after a slight inclination of her small and delicate head took no further notice of him.

He passed up the room quickly to his quasi-patient, Mrs. Greatorrex, an elderly but still pretty woman, who sat lounging in a cosy chair.

The room was warm, and sweet with flowers. It was exquisitely arranged, if not richly furnished. It spoke of refinement, if not of wealth, and was very charming and womanly.

A few Persian rugs lay here and there, and jars full of early flowering branches were placed in the corners of the windows and against the tall screens that stood

at the end of the room. All the place was sweet with little bowls full of honeysuckle and primroses.

Mrs. Greatorrex held out her hand to him.

"How good of you to come," said she, in her low, cultivated voice. "And with your hard day's work, too."

"I like work. How do you feel this morning—you are better? You look better. You will be out of my hands altogether soon, and I shall be left desolate."

His eyes wandered to the charming figure bending over the primroses in the window, as he said this. But the charming figure seemed engrossed with her pretty flowers.

She was a tall girl, slender, graceful, with dark hair, and a mouth beautiful in its strength and purity. Her eyes were her chief feature, and shone like stars, in her delightful face. They were a clear grey—soft and kind by day—dark and even kinder by night. And so full of expression, love and laughter, grief and quick delight, tenderness and anger, *all* things, those perfect eyes could declare in their right season.

Just now they were lowered, so it was hard to see what lay within their shining depths, but a little line across her forehead showed that her thoughts were not altogether pleasant; she bent even more assiduously over the flowers, and showed no disposition to go forward and add to the pleasant reception her aunt was giving Dr. Darkham.

The latter had been going through the usual formula with Mrs. Greatorrex, feeling her pulse, asking about her appetite, etc., and then had drifted into a light gossip. This pleased his patient and gave him leisure to gaze

on the lovely figure in the window. He hardly cared that she did not speak to him; in his present angry, excited mood it seemed enough to him that he could sit there, and watch each turn of her graceful neck, each movement of the small white hands, as they lifted and arranged the flowers. The remembrance of other hands, coarse, red, plebeian, only served to make more exquisite those on which he now looked.

After a time, he rose, and bid Mrs. Greatorrex good-bye. Then he turned deliberately to the girl.

"If you can spare me one moment, Miss Nesbitt, there is just a word or two I would say to you about our patient here," with a smile and bow towards Mrs. Greatorrex. "She has been making a little too free, I am afraid, and if you will let me write a prescription in the next room——"

"Certainly," said Agatha, courteously but coldly. She let her flowers fall, and led the way to the little ante-room beyond, hidden by a falling curtain, where a tiny writing-room had been made up. She had been through it so often! There was always some prescription to be written in here, and always some last words to be said to her about Mrs. Greatorrex that it might be as well the patient didn't hear. Now, however, when Mrs. Greatorrex had almost ceased to be a patient, these secret instructions seemed to her a farce.

She stood silent, whilst he told her to keep her aunt a little warmer, or something as trivial, and then scribbled a line or two on a sheet of paper for the chemist. Then he went. But he had gained his end. He had held her small cool hand in his. She had not been able to refuse it when he held out his.

CHAPTER III.

"Fear is the last of ills;
In time we hate that which we often fear."

AGATHA came back to the drawing-room, and went straight to her flowers. She did not look at her aunt.

"Well?" asked the latter, inquisitively. She loved discussing her own ailments.

"Well, there was nothing new. He evidently thinks you immensely better. So much better that I wonder he comes here at all."

"It is very kind of him to come," said Mrs. Greatorex, calmly.

"It is too kind. And—for nothing."

"My dear Agatha, I'm afraid it cannot be for nothing. I expect he will see little symptoms of—"

"I don't mean that. What," impatiently, "I want to say is, that he gains nothing by coming here."

"Nothing in a pecuniary sense, certainly," said Mrs. Greatorex, "but he likes good society, and——"

Agatha made a sudden movement.

"I wonder how you can do it," says she, abandoning the position she had taken up a moment ago in the window with a view to hiding her face from her aunt's inquisitive regard, and now turning to face her openly. Her tone was impulsive—even passionate. Her slender, girlish figure, seemed to vibrate with the angry feeling within her.

"Do what?" asked Mrs. Greatorrex, letting the pretty, little, pale, pink, silk sock she was knitting, lie upon her lap for a moment. She lifted her bright, brown eyes to her niece's face.

"Accept his services gratuitously."

Mrs. Greatorrex laughed.

"What have you got into your head now?" asked she. "He has attended me for the past year. Last month I sent him a cheque with a little hint to the effect that as I felt so much better, I need not trouble him again. He came the next day. I then told him plainly I could afford no more fees out of my slender income. He said—very gracefully, as I thought—that he could never bear to resign a case until a perfect cure had been accomplished—or something to that effect. Well, why should I not allow him to be happy in his own way? This hateful rheumatism still requires a mentor to keep it in order, and if I can have that mentor for nothing, why, so much the better; you know my purse is not a long one."

"And I am a burden to you," said the girl in a low voice.

"My good child, never give yourself over to nonsense!" said Mrs. Greatorrex, with a shrug. "You know very well I am delighted to have you." She took up her little sock again and turned the heel. The clicking of the knitting needles was all that could be heard. Mrs. Greatorrex was always knitting pink silk socks for her young married friends. They took a long time to do, and they cost so little, and young mothers were so overpowered with gratitude when they got them. "So sweet of her to remember darling baby." Mrs. Greatorrex

never knitted socks for a third baby. Enthusiasm on every subject under the sun wears off after a while.

The needles clicked on, and Agatha thought. *Was* her aunt delighted to have her? Sometimes things pointed that way. But certainly she was a burden to her, as Mrs. Greatorrex's income was not only a small one, but she herself was of a decidedly miserly disposition. She would save where she could, and Agatha always had an uncomfortable feeling that her aunt knew she could save more if she—Agatha—were not there to be looked after and maintained. The girl had certainly a miserable £20 a year of her own, but that was too little. She made it suffice for her dress, but it sufficed very badly. It was all, however, her father Colonel Nesbitt had been able to leave her. And her aunt had been kind in many ways. Sometimes the girl felt that she loved her, worldly as she was. When she was sixteen, the colonel (who had put his daughter to school in Belgium on the death of his wife and who had seen very little of her since) died.

At sixteen she had found herself an orphan, without a friend, and almost penniless, and but that Mrs. Greatorrex had then come forward the poor child would hardly have known what to do or where to go. Fortune favours the brave, they say; sometimes, however, it favours the beautiful.

Agatha Nesbitt was beautiful, and suddenly fortune came to her in the shape of Mrs. Greatorrex. It was not a great fortune, truly, but it lifted the girl for the moment out of her Slough of Despond.

But now another terror threatened her. This detestable Doctor Darkham, whose visits to her aunt for

the past few months had been so regular, whose visits, now that her aunt had declared herself off his hands, were still so regular—troubled her more than she cared to think.

What there was in his manner to distress her she hardly knew—hardly understood; but she had learned to regard his coming with fear and loathing—to dread those *tête-à-têtes*, when, in the little ante-room, he wrote out his prescriptions, and gave her his instructions.

Not that a word had ever been spoken that all the world might not hear—not a look; and, after all, what was there in the lengthened regard of his dark, unfathomable eyes to alarm her? She could not tell. Not—not *love* certainly. He—a married man!

Whenever she thought of him, however, it was with secret loathing, and a strange unaccountable dread, as of danger to come.

She had remonstrated with her aunt very often. To take such a favour from a mere stranger! To accept his visits without payment! Mrs. Greatorex, whose pride in her birth was excessive, but who would have gone any lengths to save her pocket, had pooh-poohed the girl's expostulations and had continued to accept Doctor Darkham's visits without protest and with quite an admirable air—a blend of hauteur and gratitude.

Agatha roused herself from her thoughts.

"I know how good you have been to me always," said she with warmth. "You are my one friend. It is because I love you that I can't bear you to have this Dr. Darkham coming here like this. He——"

"My dear, he comes only because he likes to get

away from the atmosphere of his sordid home. That pays him. He likes nice people, you know."

"Well, then, I wish he would try and find them somewhere else than here."

"That is a little selfish of you, surely; considering how I benefit by his calls. I wonder," letting a sharp glance from her bright eyes again rest upon her niece, "why you dislike the poor man so much."

"Dislike him?"

"Yes, you do. Like all girls, you are full of nonsensical fads, and," slowly, "it is my opinion that you think he is in love with you."

"Aunt Hilda!"

A hot rush of indignant blood dyed the girl's cheeks crimson.

"You forget!" said she, haughtily.

"That he is a married man? No, I don't, indeed. But I never yet met a girl who didn't think that the man, married or single, old or young, rich or poor, who came perpetually to the house in which she happened to be, was not in love with her."

"I can't congratulate you then on girls you have known!" said Agatha, coldly.

"No?" Mrs. Greatorax laughed the little irritating laugh that belonged to her. "A poor compliment to yourself. Still, I have been studying you a little of late, and I feel sure I am right. Get this latest fad of all out of your head, my dear girl, and as soon as possible. Dr. Darkham is not in love with anything, save pleasant society, and he naturally shows a strong longing to get into that pleasant society whenever he can."

"Are we the only pleasant people in Rickton?"

"You still cling to your fad, I see," said Mrs. Greatorex, who had now brought the little pink silk heel of her sock to perfection, and held it out from her, needles and all, to admire it. "Well, dear child, if you think he is in love with you—*think* so. Far be it from me to impugn his taste. But if such is the case, you will pardon my saying that"—with an amused air, "you must have given the poor, dear creature a good deal of encouragement."

"You should remember he has a wife," said Agatha, coldly.

"Why, so I should." Again that irritating little cackle grated on the girl's ears. "But really it is very hard to remember. He himself forgets it so persistently. Poor man; who can blame him? Bad as he is, and, of course, we know he rose from the rankest of the ranks, still she . . . What a woman! A perfect annoyance to the neighbourhood."

"I can't see how she annoys anybody. One never sees her."

"You'll see her to-morrow night at the Firs-Robinsons', anyway. Mrs. Poynter told me this morning that she was going."

"What?" said Agatha. She paused. She even forgot the argument in question in the thought of seeing Mrs. Darkham at the dance to-morrow night. Mrs. Darkham, who lived like a snail in her shell, so seldom emerging. How strange. "Are you sure she is going?"

"Quite sure."

"As a rule she refuses all invitations."

"There's where she shows her one grain of sense."

"There's where Dr. Darkham shows his tyranny," said Agatha. "I believe he doesn't allow her to go anywhere."

"Now, who says that?"

"Well, all the people we know."

Mrs. Greatorrex shrugged her thin ladylike shoulders.

"I suppose you know by this time that 'people are mostly fools.' And even if such light talk be true, and Mrs. Darkham is such a nonentity as to be controlled in the way you declare, her husband is quite wise to exercise his power."

"It is not wisdom in his case, it is cowardice. He is afraid of her vulgarity."

"No wonder. She was a tradesman's daughter, wasn't she?"

"Well!" with some fire, "wasn't he a tradesman's son?"

"Still, consider!"

"Oh, *you* to consider!" the girl interrupted her, vehemently, "you who lay so much stress on 'family,' you who will hardly acknowledge the Firs-Robinsons because they cannot swear to a grandfather."

"How you do excite yourself over trifles," said Mrs. Greatorrex, with another shrug. "What I was going to say was that Dr. Darkham must be pitied about his marriage, to a certain degree. He, by reason of intellect and education has risen out of the mire of his birth, and his original surroundings. She, without intellect and education, has sunk deeper into hers. I think," said Mrs. Greatorrex, who had a fond fancy that she was a sympathetic soul, "that of all harrowing afflictions,

the worst must be that of a man tied for life to an uncongenial companion."

"I think it must be infinitely worse for a woman to be tied for life to a thoroughly bad husband."

"My dear Agatha! You will end by representing Dr. Darkham as a modern Bluebeard. As for me I pity him. And there are so many cases just like his. A young man of his parentage—nobody at all in fact—starts in life—very naturally—by marrying somebody in his own class. Some dreadful person! Then he, being clever—a reader, a thoughtful, an ambitious man—rises. She stands rootedly still. She clogs his every step. She is as a mill-stone round his neck, weighing him down, keeping him back from the goal to which he would attain—the goal of equality with his superiors, which he feels ought to be his, because of the intellect that ennobles him. But the more he aspires to fly, the heavier she grows. Now, we all know Mrs. Darkham. What a mere clod! Vulgar, wearisome, without an idea. No wonder he hates her."

"For all that, if a man marries a woman of his own free will, he should deal fairly by her," said Agatha, thoughtfully.

"Of course. But there are always exceptional cases. And surely Mrs. Darkham is one of them."

"I don't think so. She is very vulgar and very fat, and unutterably dull, but one must remember that she was all that when he married her. What, then, does he look for now?"

"Perhaps for the 'H's' she is always dropping," said Mrs. Greatorrex, with a laugh. "You say she never goes anywhere, that he keeps her in durance vile, but

she is going to this dance to-morrow night at the Firs-Robinsons', and I saw her yesterday at the Poynters'. I'm sure I wish I hadn't! She gets on one's nerves so. What is it about her that jars so dreadfully? Vulgar, one can make up one's mind to, but stupidity mixed with it, is too much for anybody. She started the subject of that idiot son of hers, and wore it to tatters, whilst we all sat aghast, and wished ourselves dead. I was quite thankful Dr. Darkham wasn't there. I really think if he had been he would have been quite justified in murdering her."

Mrs. Greatorex laughed lightly.

"Oh, no!" The words seemed to fall from Agatha unconsciously. There was horror in them—she shuddered. "Aunt Hilda, how dreadful! To murder her!"

Mrs. Greatorex laid down her knitting.

"It wasn't so much that she was vulgar—had bad taste—but that she was so—so oppressive. And rude, too. Very rude."

"I could fancy," said the girl, slowly, "that she is very unhappy. I have often thought it."

"You are prejudiced. *I* could fancy that she is very nearly as much out of her mind as that terrible son of hers."

"Poor Edwy! I met him yesterday in the wood. He came crash through it like a young Samson. Right and left he flung the branches, as though not heeding them, and shouting as he came. Of course, he could not hear himself, but I confess it frightened me. Poor, poor boy. To be deaf and dumb, and idiotic, seems—well—a cruel sentence."

"Strange how people like that live on. Useless—

mere burdens—creatures one shrinks from. Why, he must be almost grown up now.”

“He is sixteen; but he looks a mere child. His body has grown, but his face has not; it is so young—pathetically young; and at times almost beautiful. Nearly all idiots are hideous, because of the want of soul in them, but Edwy sometimes——”

“Not when he is excited.”

“No, no. And not when he laughs. What a frightful sound it is. You know, I suppose, that he can say one word. At least not a word, but a noise that has a meaning.”

“Mr. Blount told me about it. ‘*Sho*’ is the sound, is it not?”

“Yes, and it always means his mother. He calls to her in that way. It is very remarkable. You know he adores her. After all I think she can’t be without some good quality, when that poor stricken boy loves her so much.”

“Like to like,” said Mrs. Greatorex, carelessly. “Really, she is nearly as dull as he is. Let us forget her. She grows fatiguing. What of to-morrow night? Did you hear who was likely to be there?”

“At the Firs-Robinsons’? Everybody as far as I can see.”

“Quite right too. They are ‘nobody’ if you like.”

“I think Elfrida is charming,” said Agatha, quietly.

“Elfrida!” Mrs. Greatorex sniffed. “Elfrida with Robinson at the end of it! Firs-Robinson, because of the society craze for double names. Did anybody of real birth ever tack on another name to their good old one unless for money purposes? If they had called

themselves First-Robinson it would at all events have had the merit of a joke. Well, and so everyone is to be there. What do they mean by everyone?"

"Why," laughing, "I suppose *everyone*. And I hear Lord Stilton and his party, and Lord Ambert!"

"Ambert!" Mrs. Greatorrex let the sock fall to the floor this time. "Can it be true that he wants to marry that girl? I cannot imagine Miss Robinson—a countess! But he is very hard up, and she has a great deal of money. Money is everything now-a-days?" Then suddenly—leaning forward, and letting her brilliant eyes rest upon her niece's face as if indignant with her—"Why haven't *you* money?" said she.

The uncontrollable ambition that ruled her whole life betrayed itself in these words. If Agatha had been an heiress she might have married Lord Ambert.

CHAPTER IV.

"LATE as usual, and all your partners in hysterics!" said a quick voice; a voice a little sharp perhaps, and decided, but clear as a bell. Agatha, who had just entered the dancing-room with her chaperon, turned quickly round and smiled at Miss Firs-Robinson.

"I couldn't help it. Aunt Hilda was afraid to come out, and so Mrs. Poynter has kindly brought me."

"Oh! if it is Mrs. Poynter, thank heaven you are here at all. Her wild determination to be 'fashionable,' as she calls it, makes her slow in many ways. But here you are, anyway."

"What a charming gown," said Agatha, looking at her friend.

Certainly, the gown was not more charming than its wearer, Miss Firs-Robinson was looking her very best to-night—small, fairy-like, refined, in spite of her parentage, which indeed, was not all it might have been. Her grandfather had been a store boy in America, had got on, and become the head of a store himself. He had also been a dealer in furs in Canada, and made his principal pile on them, and they say—that is some scurrilous people say—that his son, when he inherited the older Robinson's great wealth, wishing to honour his memory had put on Furs to that illustrious name, with a view to immortalising the old man's "knowth"

in a fashionable way. But his filial piety was far ahead of his spelling, and so the "u" became "i". But then "they say" is such a well, such an unreliable person!

Anyway Miss Firs-Robinson was as delicately formed as though the blood of all the Howards had run through her veins. A little thing—small—vivacious. "A dream" her adorers called her, and they were many and various. A "golden dream" they might have added. Her father, who had succeeded to the Furs never forgot he was originally an Englishman, and made straight for that "bright little tight little island" the moment he felt himself above the whims of Fortune's vilest efforts. Having gained that ascendancy, and England as well, he promptly died.

That was five years ago. Elfrida, who had been sent home at an early age for educational purposes, and who remembered but slightly her American experiences, had lived all these years with her father's sister, the elder Miss Firs-Robinson. Poor thing, she had rather squirmed at the additional name at first—not being accustomed to grandeur of that sort—but having been reasoned with by her brother in many ill-spelt letters had given in to the terrible! She was a most estimable woman, if extremely fat; and as full of prejudices, as they say an egg is full of meat.

Elfrida, in spite of an unmistakable touch of shrewdness about her—borrowed, no doubt, from her trading parents—was as lovely as the dawning day. Her pretty fair hair covered in tiny curls a head as patrician in shape as though its owner had been the daughter of a hundred earls. And in this head to-night

some diamond stars were glittering, sparkling gaily as its owner moved and spoke. Her mouth was small, but not too small. And her nose was not Greek. It was pretty and very loveable for all that. Her eyes were blue, and so easy to read, said the tyro; so difficult, said the expert.

She was a lovely creation, however it went, as she now stood looking up at Agatha, who was so much taller than she was.

"If you hadn't come," said Miss Firs-Robinson, "there would have been murder presently. Dr. ——"

Agatha's face changed and whitened; she made an impulsive movement.

"Dr. Dillwyn has been wandering round aimlessly for the last hour, seeking whom he may devour, I suppose. Certainly he has not been seeking a partner. Now you have come——"

"Well? Now I have come?" Agatha repeated her words. "How can you be so stupid?" said she. But the lovely colour had come back to her cheeks, and her eyes were smiling.

"Stupid! Stupid! I like that. Well, I have news for you. Who do you think is——"

"Our dance, I believe," said someone to Elfrida at that moment. It was Elfrida's shadow during the past two months—Lord Ambert. He bowed to Agatha over Miss Firs-Robinson's head.

"Is it? Yes, of course," said Elfrida, glancing at her card. "But I have just one word to say to Miss Nesbitt." She smiled again at Ambert, very prettily. "Too prettily," thought Agatha, with a little fear for her friend at her heart.

But her friend seemed to have no fear as she turned to her.

"Do you know who has come to-night to stay with us for a month? Dicky—Dicky Browne. He met Auntie and me last season in town. And Auntie asked him to run down to us for a bit. He's a nuisance, certainly," shrugging her shoulders. "We all know that in spite of everything; but, I do love Dicky more than anyone else, I think."

"I wish I could believe that," said Agatha, in a low tone. Lord Ambert was standing near, waiting for Elfrida. "Better love him than——"

"Pouf! What a suggestion! Why should I love anyone?" Elfrida's piquante face was now alight with mischief. "Do you think I am such an one as thyself? I tell you, Agatha, that I, for one, have no heart! I can't afford one."

"I should think you could afford anything," said Agatha, who had flushed a little at Elfrida's allusion to her own heart. "You could at all events afford to marry the man who loved you."

"And where does he live?" asked Elfrida, laughing. There was immense amusement in her laugh.

"You know," said Agatha, slowly, earnestly.

"You're lovely; you're a perfect delight," said Miss Firs-Robinson, her amusement now growing more apparent; "but really I don't. I know only that I—want to be——"

She glanced at Agatha from under her long lashes.

"Happy?" said Agatha, answering.

"No, a countess," said the pretty little fairy with a gay grimace. She looked over Agatha's shoulder and

beckoned to Lord Ambert, who was still "in waiting," to come to her.

He came. A middle-sized, well set-up man of about forty, with a rather supercilious mouth and small eyes. There was a touch of insolence, of cruelty, about the mouth, and the eyes were furtive. He looked quite a gentleman, however, which a great many earls do not, and, of course, there he scored. He was a poor man for his rank in life, and was desirous of impounding the numerous thousands in which Miss Firs-Robinson lay, as it were enwrapped. He never forgot his dignity, however, when with her. He gave her quite to understand that she was by birth many degrees below zero, and that he was a star in her firmament. Of course, she would marry him—when he chose to ask her—and he delayed that honour with a view to showing her how important he was. She must wait and hope and, finally, have her reward.

In the meantime Elfrida, who had a very acute mind of her own, saw straight through him. In a sense he amused her, and, after all, she knew very well who would be mistress and master after her marriage with him. Not Ambert, anyway. Her money should be securely settled on herself; she was quite decided about that. She was quite decided also about her marriage with him. She had lived some little time in America, as has been said, and had learned the value of our English lords, so she had arranged with herself very early in life never to die until she could have a title carved upon her tombstone. Ambert had come in quite handy. He was the only unmarried earl within a radius of a tremendous number of miles, so, of course, he would

have to do. It was a pity he was so old—that he was a little bald—that his expression was so unpleasant. But he was an earl. She would be Lady Ambert; and if he thought he would have it all his own way afterwards, why—she would show him. She hadn't the least doubt about his proposing to her. She gave herself no trouble on that head; and indeed she used to know great mirth sometimes, when he had been specially laborious over his efforts to prove to her that he had twenty or forty heiresses in his eye, who would all be ready at a moment's notice to accept his title, his debts and his bald head.

For all that she was determined to marry him. This, however, did not prevent her indulging in small flirtations here and there. There were several young officers in the barracks in the next town who were literally at her feet, and there was the curate, Tom Blount, who everyone knew (though *he* kept himself steadily *away* from her feet), was for all that a very slave to her every caprice.

"Ah, Mr. Blount," said she, as she passed him now on her way to the conservatory. "Here? And you haven't asked me for a single dance."

"I don't dance," said Tom Blount, barely acknowledging the supercilious bow given him by Lord Ambert. "The Bishop doesn't like it, you know, and to ask you to sit out a dance with me would be more than I dare venture."

He smiled at her out of two honest blue eyes. And she smiled back at him out of two very dishonest ones, though all four were much of the same colour.

"'If thy heart fail thee,'" quoted she, daringly, and

most reprehensibly under the circumstances. To play with a heart is a poor game when all is told. But to this small, hard-hearted creature, whose affections had never been awakened, conquests were necessary from day to day.

"Well—I shan't let it fail me," said the curate, suddenly. His smile was somewhat forced, however. "Will you sit out one with me?"

"You don't deserve it," said she. "But—" here Lord Ambert bent and whispered something into her ear. He was evidently urging her to refuse the insolent request of this nobody, this curate of a small country parish. But his words took no effect. Elfrida listened to them, nodded and smiled as if acquiescing, and then—

"The fourteenth is a quadrille, for the sake of appeasing old Lady Saunders, I believe," said she, looking at the curate. "Will you have that dance—to sit it out with me?"

"Won't I!" said the curate, enthusiastically, who had not long left Oxford, and who was wonderfully young in many ways.

"You promised that quadrille to me," said Ambert, frowning.

"Yes, I know. But as I never dance quadrilles—" she paused and looked up at Ambert. "You see?"

"No, I don't," said he.

"Well, I am sure Mr. Blount does," said Elfrida, audaciously. "Now remember, Mr. Blount, the fourteenth is ours. I shan't believe it, you know, if you come to tell me on the eve of the fifteenth that you

had been looking for me all over the shop and couldn't find me."

"You won't have to believe anything," said Blount. "But what shall *I* have to believe in?"

Lord Ambert looked at him.

Really the audacity of this contemptible curate passed comprehension. To speak so to her, his—Ambert's—future wife. He frowned and bit his lip. That was the worst of marrying into the middle classes; they never know how to keep those beneath them in order. And when Elfrida was his wife, most would be beneath her. He should have to give her a lecture later on. And then her language! "All over the shop." Ambert shuddered. Did her grandfather's shop come into sudden remembrance?

"Why, in me," said Miss Firs-Robinson, with a last glance at Blount. She rather accentuated this glance by a movement of her lids. A second later she had vanished.

Lord Ambert, holding her hand during her descent from the steps to the garden beneath, ventured a cold remonstrance.

"Is it wise of you—you will pardon, I hope, my interference—but is it wise of you to be so kind to a person of that sort?"

"A person? Is he a person?" asked Miss Firs-Robinson with much airy astonishment. "I quite understood he was a man of good family. Whereas a 'person' must be of no family whatever."

"If without money," put in Lord Ambert, quickly, "quite so. There are, of course, grades."

"Grades?"

"Yes. A man of no birth with money is not the

same as a man of no birth without it. For money educates, refines, elevates." This he pointed with little emphases, as a small hint to her.

"And a man of birth without money?"

"Sinks." Here Lord Ambert's voice took even a lower tone. "Sinks until he meets the *extreme*—that is the lowest of all classes—with which he unites. I am afraid that young man you have just been talking to will come to that end. His people, I believe, were in a decent set at one time; but there is no money there now, and probably he will marry his landlady's daughter, or the young woman who manages the school in the village, and—repent it soon after."

"Repentance is good for the soul," said Elfrida; she laughed. "But as you show it, money is everything. Even the 'person' can be raised by it."

"It is sad, of course, but I am afraid that is really the case. In these days money is of great importance; of nearly as great importance as birth or position. It lifts the 'person' as you call it——"

"Has it then lifted me?"

"Dear Miss Firs-Robinson! What a question! Surely you do not consider yourself part of this discussion?"

He, however, *had* considered her so, and had taken pleasure in the argument that had laid her low. This was part of what he called his "*training*" of her!

"You—who are a thing apart. A thing most precious——"

"I don't want to be a 'thing,' however precious," said Miss Firs-Robinson, with decision. "I should much rather be a 'person,' for choice, however criminal

it sounds. It only wants 'age' put to it to be magnificent. And so you call Mr. Blount 'a person?'"

"Perhaps I was wrong," said Ambert, contemptuously; "a 'beggar' would be nearer the mark."

CHAPTER V.

"Aching and hot as my tired eyes be,
She is all that I wish to see."

MEANWHILE Agatha was left standing near the doorway, whilst her chaperon was explaining the reason of her late arrival to old Miss Firs-Robinson, Elfrida's aunt.

The girl's eyes were directed towards the dancers, and so absorbed was her gaze that she started visibly when a voice sounded at her elbow—that hated voice!

"May I have the pleasure of this waltz, Miss Nesbitt?"

Agatha looked up. Dr. Darkham, tall, handsome, almost young, was standing beside her.

"I am sorry—but the dance is promised," said Agatha, gently but coldly.

"I am unfortunate." He looked keenly at her, with open question in his eyes. He had educated himself very carefully on the lines of social etiquette, but education of that sort unless it comes by nature is often defective, and sometimes he forgot. It did not now suggest itself to him that to question Agatha's word, whether that word were true or false, was a *bêtise*. Some men had come up to ask Agatha for a dance, and when they were gone he spoke.

"It is promised, then?" he said. "And yet, you have only just come?"

Agatha looked at him for a moment as if surprised.

"It is promised," she said, again.

She made no attempt to explain herself. Her manner, however, was very quiet, although her face was set, and her tone frozen.

Suddenly, however, her expression changed. It lit up with a happy fervour, and her eyes shone. They were looking past Dr. Darkham's towards something beyond, and the latter, as though unable to control his longing to learn the cause of this sweet change in the lovely face before him, turned to follow her glance, and saw over there, making anxious efforts to reach her, a young man rather above middle height, with a face—that if not strictly handsome, was at all events extremely good to look at.

It was Dillwyn, the young doctor who had lately come into the neighbourhood, and who was beginning to do pretty well with a certain class of patients. Not the better classes—those belonged almost exclusively to Darkham. The latter's face clouded, and a strange look came into his eyes. That boy! Without position or money! Impossible that she should dream of him. Her aunt would never allow it. And yet that look—that brightening of the beautiful eyes.

Dillwyn was still a long way off, hemmed in by a crowd of skirts that now, being a little stiffened at the tail, took up a considerable amount of room and were not easily passed. There was even one triumphant crinoline to be seen, and Dillwyn had been caught and stopped by the wearer of that new cage. There was

still a moment or two before he could reach Agatha. Darkham caught his opportunity and turned hurriedly to her.

"I hope you will give me a dance later on?" he said, with a dogged sort of determination. He saw that she did not wish to dance with him, but the knowledge only served to strengthen his desire to dance with her; yet he did not ask her for the next dance. He felt he dared not. She had refused him already when he believed her card must be empty, and if she were to refuse him again! No, he would not press her, but yet something must be done, before she left him. An almost mad longing to waltz with her—to hold her in his arms for even a few minutes—to feel her hand in his, took possession of him. He would risk it.

"If the first supper dance is not engaged, may I hope for that?" he said, his voice quite even, his heart beating wildly.

"I am afraid I have promised that too," said Agatha—who had *not* promised it, but she felt driven to desperation. Her voice was low and tremulous. What was it about him that repelled her so? She could not, she *would* not dance with him, whatever came of it.

Darkham bowed and drew back, leaning against the wall just behind her. She felt miserable, and yet thankful that she could no longer see him. Yet she knew he was behind her, watching her; and she had been rude—certainly, very rude.

At that moment Mrs. Poynter joined her.

"Not a partner yet? I suppose you must wait for this dance to be over? Ah? here I see Dr. Dillwyn

coming towards us. You know, Agatha dearest, that he is a cousin of mine, and quite good family and all that, but a detrimental of the first water."

Agatha laughed.

"Yes, yes; you ought to take it that way. It really should not be serious," said Mrs. Poynter, who was a young woman and fond of Agatha, and thought the girl with her charming face ought to make a good match. "I am so glad you are not going to be serious over it, because, really, it would be a terrible throwing away of your self."

"But, Mrs. Poynter——"

"Yes, of course. He hasn't proposed, you mean, but—— I really wish he had not been placed here through the influence of your uncle—no, no, of course, your aunt's brother-in-law, I mean—old Mr. Greatorrex—Reginald Greatorrex. The old gentleman might just as well have sent him anywhere else, and—he *does* run after you a good deal, Agatha, doesn't he now?"

"I never saw him run in my life," said Agatha, demurely.

"Ah, there! I see you are evading the subject. And here he comes. Now, Agatha, be careful; you know——"

"Yes; I know—I know," said Agatha, smiling at her. Yet she hardly heard her; her eyes and thoughts were for the young man, who now courteously but resolutely had got through the crowd that parted them, and was standing before her, with glad eyes and a most satisfied expression. There she was, and he was with her. There was only one "her" in the world for him.

Neither of them saw the face behind them. The face of the man leaning against the wall!

CHAPTER VI.

“Awake my heart, to be loved. Awake, awake!
The darkness silvers away, the morn doth break,
It leaps in the sky; unrisen lustres slake
The o’ertaken moon. Awake, O heart awake!”

“At last!” said John Dillwyn. “You have not given it away? You have remembered?”

“The dance?”

“Yes. You know you said you would give me the first on your arrival.”

“But this! I am so late! I could not have expected you to wait——”

“I have waited, however. And it is mine?” He was now looking at her anxiously. What did her manner—her hesitation mean?

“Yes, of course, but have you no partner?”

“I have, indeed,” laughing. “One I would not readily change. I have you.”

“But,” looking up at him a little shyly after this plain speech. “How did you arrange it?”

“Very simply. This will be *my* first waltz as well as yours.”

“Oh, that is too bad of you,” said the girl, colouring softly. She meant to be angry with him, perhaps, but if so the effort was a dead failure. The corners of her lips were smiling, and a happy light had crept into her eyes. “To wait so long, and——”

"It was long; I admit that," interrupted he, smiling. "I thought you would never come."

"It was all Mrs. Poynter's fault," said Agatha. "And, really, but for me I am sure she would not be here even now. I dined there, you know, and after dinner I hinted, and hinted, and hinted, until I am afraid she felt she *ought* to come whether she liked it or not."

At this *naïve* speech they both laughed, in a subdued way but so happily.

"Well, come on, now, let us get even a turn or two," said Dillwyn. "By-the-bye, the next—is that free?"

"Yes," said Agatha. She felt a little frightened; she hoped he would not know she had kept it free purposely. Four or five men had asked her for dances whilst she stood near the door, on her arrival with Mrs. Poynter, and when giving them a dance here and there she had steadily refused to part with the next one.

She did not tell herself why at the moment, but she knew all the same.

"May I have it?" asked Dillwyn, with such a delightful anxiety that all at once her mind was set at rest.

He suspected nothing, thought of nothing but his fear that the dance might have been given away before he could ask her for it. Oh, how dear he was! Was there ever anyone so good, so perfect?

He passed his arm round her waist, and together they joined the dancers.

Agatha waltzed delightfully. Her lovely *svelte* figure swayed and sympathised with the music, just as though

it had caught her and was moving with her. Dillwyn waltzed well too.

The dance was too soon at an end.

"The night is lovely," said he, "will you come out?" He felt that he wanted to be more alone with her, the presence of the people round checked him, destroyed the keenness of the joy he always knew when with her.

"I should like it," said she.

They went towards the conservatory, from which there were steps to the garden outside. The door of the conservatory opened off the dancing-room, and was close to where Agatha had been standing on her entrance. Darkham was still there.

He had not stirred since Agatha had floated away with Dillwyn's arm around her. He had watched her persistently. He watched her now as she went through the conservatory door down to the gardens, that glad, sweet light upon her face. Were his wife's words true then, after all? Was there something between her and that fellow—that interloper, who had come from no one knew where, to dispute his right in all the parish ailments? His eyes followed them as though they could not tear themselves away, as Dillwyn and Agatha, happy, laughing, went out of the door beyond into the mild and star-lit night.

A laugh roused him; it was his wife's. A terrible vision in scarlet satin, trimmed with black velvet bows, met his gaze as he turned. Mrs. Darkham was distinctly *en fête* to-night.

"Well, what d'ye think now? That's her young man. What did I say? Don't you wish you were young, eh? Why, she looks upon you as a Methusaler!"

Darkham drew his breath sharply. He looked quickly round him. Had anyone heard? The woman's hideous vulgarity made him sick. Try as he would, how could he raise himself with this incubus hanging round his neck.

He moved away, tired at heart, half-mad with misery.

Agatha and Dillwyn had reached the garden by this time—a garden lit by heaven's own lamps, and sweet with the breath of sleeping flowers.

A few other couples were strolling up and down the paths—now seen, now lost amongst the shadows—but over there, near the pale, sweet-smelling syringa, was a garden-chair untenanted. They moved towards it in a leisurely fashion; there was no haste, no occasion for hurry. Whether they stood or walked, or sat, they were together—that was the principal thing. They knew this, but secretly; to their own hearts only was the sweet truth confessed; for, as yet, no word of love had passed between them.

"The next is mine, too," said he, in a glad voice, as if dwelling on some joy that nothing could spoil.

"Yes. We must take care not to lose it."

"And yet it is so lovely out here. Are you sure you are warm enough? And, at all events, it is a good thing to know we need not hurry—that there is no other partner waiting for either of us."

He seemed to dwell upon the "we" and "us," as if they conveyed great sweetness to him. His heart seemed full. All at once it seemed to him as though he *must* speak to her—must tell her of the love that

filled his heart. The hour, the loneliness, the silence, all tempted him, and yet he feared!

She had known him so short a time—and what was there in her manner to him that should give him courage? Could he dare to put it to the touch to win—or *lose* it all? To lose! That was what held him back.

Agatha was speaking.

"I am sorry you waited for me," said she, lying unconsciously. Had not her heart beaten with delight because he had waited. "And you, too, who are so fond of dancing."

"Ah! Fond! that is a strong expression. I am not a slave to it, you know."

"No." She paused. She seemed to study him for a moment. His face, young, strong, with a sort of defiance in it, as though he could and would conquer his world, fascinated her. It had always fascinated her from the first moment she saw it, now three months ago. It was not so much the kindness of it, as its strength that attracted her. She, too, could be strong. She felt in harmony with him from the very first. He was, as has been said, not strictly handsome, but his eyes were dark and expressive, and his mouth firm. The pose of his head was charming and his figure well-built and athletic. There was a vigorous grace about him that made up for the fact that his nose was quite inconsistent with the lines laid down for beauty, and that his cheek-bones were a trifle prominent. But, after all, I don't think when a girl is honestly in love she cares much about the shape of her lover's nose, and I have known one who persisted in thinking high cheek-

bones a beauty. There was one excellent thing about Dillwyn—he was always full of life. The desire of living was great within him. He enjoyed, as it were, the very coming and going of his breath; the wild winds of winter, the balmy breezes of summer—all alike were good to him. He was always in splendid spirits, and the milk of human kindness ran swiftly within his veins. Already the poor in his district began to adore him, for kind were his words and encouraging his smiles, and these counted with the sickly ones even more than the shillings that so often came out of a pocket where but few shillings lay. He had begun his fight with life unaided, save by the influence of old Reginald Greatorex, who had property in Rickton, and had got him appointed there, but he felt no fears. A natural buoyancy upheld him. And indeed there was every reason to hope for his success. He was of good family, of good looks. His whole heart was in his profession (at least, all that was not given to Agatha) and his soul was as clean as his body.

“Well,” said he, smiling at her. He was wondering at the depth of her regard.

“I was thinking,” said she, starting slightly, “that you could never be a slave to anything.”

Dillwyn looked at her now.

“There, you wrong me,” said he. “I could be—I am—a slave!”

It was impossible to ignore the fact that he meant something. His tone was redolent of meaning; his eyes spoke, too. Agatha paled a little, yet kept herself together admirably.

“It is difficult to believe,” said she calmly.

"Why should it be difficult?"

He drew closer to her involuntarily. Should he speak—now?

"I don't know. But you don't lend yourself readily to the idea. You look as if you could never be easily swayed or governed."

"Not easily, perhaps. But—" he put out his hand as if to clasp hers.

At this moment a sudden movement in the bushes behind her struck upon Agatha's ear. She sprang to her feet.

CHAPTER VII.

The evening darkness over,
After a day so bright,
The wind-capt waves discover
That wild will be the night;
There's sound of distant thunder.

A SENSE of faintness covered her. By some strange prescience, she knew who stood behind there in the darkness, concealed, listening. A great horror took possession of her. Why should he haunt her so? What was she to him? He who had a living wife! She felt she was trembling.

She turned to Dillwyn, who had risen too.

"Come back to the house," said she. Her voice was nervous, but very low. She moved away from the seat on which she had been resting, with a haste that was almost feverish. Dillwyn followed her, his mind disturbed. Had she fathomed his determination to speak

to her, and had she purposely prevented his speaking? He went at once to the point, as he always did when uncertain or perplexed.

"Have I offended you?" asked he.

"No. Oh! no. You must not think that. How could you have offended me? But I thought I heard someone—there—behind the shrubs."

"But even so, there are people all over the place to-night."

"Yes, I know." Her tone now was almost heart-broken. Had *she* offended *him* irretrievably, because of her dread of that other? And yet—how could she explain? They were nearing the house now, and the chance of clearing the atmosphere was growing narrower. She stopped suddenly and held out her hand to him. "You are still my friend?" said she.

"I shall be your friend to the last day of my life," said Dillwyn. But his tone was heavy; the elasticity that always distinguished it had gone out of it for the first time. Her friend! Did she wish him to understand that he was placed on that poor basis?—that he was never to get beyond it? He, who would have given her all—the very heart of him.

In silence they reached the house—in silence mounted the steps that led to the conservatory. Not another word was said about the dance impending. Agatha seeing a couch surrounded by fragrant shrubs went towards it.

"The dance has begun," said Dillwyn, but so coldly that she shrank from him.

"I am tired," she said.

"Then you had better rest here. Shall I bring you an ice?"

"Thank you."

He went away. Agatha dropped on to the lounge and gave her misery full play. She had put an end to it all—all that might have made her dull life a very spring of joy. She had marred every hope she had, because of the man whom she loathed and dreaded. And yet to tell the man who loved her that another man—a married man—pursued her with his hateful attentions was more than she could do.

Now, left alone, her spirit failed her, and her eyes filled with tears. She would have given all she possessed—alas! how small a sum—to be at home, in her own room, alone so that her grief might have full sway. She had offended him for ever. He would not understand, and she could not help him to understand, and so he would misjudge her for ever. She almost hoped he would not come back with the ice. She dreaded more than his absence, the coldness of his regard. She——

"Can I do anything for you, Miss Nesbitt?"

Dr. Darkham stood beside her. It was to Agatha as though he had risen from the dead. She had supposed him still outside in the garden. But he had followed her apparently—*followed* her. Was he always to follow her?

"No, thank you," she said, in a voice well kept in order.

"You are not dancing then?"

"Not for the moment."

"Your partner is Dr. Dillwyn?"

"Yes."

"He was your partner for the last, too, I think?"

Agatha roused herself. She looked full at him; there was a smile upon her beautiful lips.

"Ah, Dr. Darkham, I have already a chaperon," said she.

If she had dreamt of taking him back she found herself mistaken.

"A most inefficient one," said Darkham steadily. "Why should you be allowed to listen to the solicitations of a mere beggar? Were your aunt to hear of this——"

"My aunt!" Agatha looked up at him, but after that one swift glance drew back. What was there in his eyes? Oh, horrible! Surely, surely now she knew that she was not wrong when lately she told herself in shrinking whispers that this man was in love with her. There had been something so strange in the expression of his eyes when looking at her—something so *empresé* in his manner—something so downright hateful in the inflexion of his voice.

"My aunt is quite capable of looking after me without the interference of anyone," said Agatha, slowly. "You have been very kind to Mrs. Greatorex, but——"

"There has been no kindness——"

"But you must not extend your kindness to me. I want no other guardian but my aunt." She rose and looked him straight in the face, "Pray do not trouble yourself about my welfare for the future. It has nothing to do with you, nor have I anything to do with you, either."

She passed him and went on; she saw Dillwyn coming towards her with the ice; she had believed she would rather not have seen him return, but now she

went to him gladly. Anything to get away from the dreadful man behind her.

Darkham fell slowly into the chair she had just left. Every joint seemed out of gear, a very hatred of life filled him. That girl—her face, her form—they haunted him. And side by side with hers always grew another face, another form—that of his wife! How repulsive the latter was—how hideous! What vile fiend had arranged his marriage? A mere mockery of marriage, where hatred alone was the link that bound the two.

Gold had bought him. Gold, that had given a false brilliancy to the faded yellow of her hair, and thrown a gleaming into her light, lustreless eyes. Thrice accursed gold. Had he but waited—had he but relied upon himself and given his undoubted genius a chance, he might have risen, unaided, to the highest point, and been now free to marry the woman he loved.

Yes; there would have been a chance for him then. With wild, increasing exultation he remembered how she had risen to-night out there in the shrubberies as Dillwyn was on the point of proposing to her. She had cast him off in a sense. Gently though. She was always kind and gentle. But she certainly put him off; she did not care for him then.

Darkham's face glowed as he sat there in the dim pink sweetness of the conservatory lamps.

If he were free—free to try again! If this woman to whom he was tied was gone—*dead*! Then his chance might come. If she did not care for Dillwyn—why, she might care for *him*. At present how *could* she? That sweet, pure, perfect creature, how could she give

even one thought to a man married. But if he were free—

“Why don’t you come out and look at her?” said the coarse voice he dreaded, at his ear; “she’s dancing with Dillwyn. It”—with an ironical laugh—“will do you good to see her. She dances lovely—’specially with Dillwyn.”

CHAPTER VIII.

“I feel my sinews slacken’d with the fright,
And a cold sweat trills down through all my limbs,
As if I were dissolving into water.”

MRS. GREATOREX was, in a lady-like sort of way, a confirmed gossip. To have told her so personally, would have been to make her your enemy for life. The way she looked at it was far more Christian—she said she “took a kindly interest in her neighbours.”

To-day her interest was particularly strong, if not very kindly; and she was now, from the depths of her low lounging chair, catechising Agatha about the dance last night. It was a perfunctory catechism, as it was her “At home” day, and she hoped presently that most of her neighbours would drop in to “tell her things.” She was always very keen about any news that concerned the Firs-Robinsons, who were really nobodies, whilst she— She generally paused there, believing the silence to be more effective than any words.

Her grandfather had been an earl—out-at-elbows, it was true, but yet an earl. She laid great store by

this, and periodically reminded her acquaintances of it. Most of the inhabitants of Rickton indeed had learned, with just cause, to loathe and abhor the name of Mrs. Greatorex's grandparent. Her mother, Lady Winifred, had married (badly from a monied point of view) a young and reckless guardsman, who died three years after her marriage, leaving her all his debts, a packet of letters from some person called "Tricksy," and an infant daughter. But then he was one of the Engletons of Derbyshire, and would have come into a baronetcy if three uncles and five cousins had been suddenly and mercifully removed. Mrs. Greatorex always clung to this great fact about her father, and in hysterical moments had been known to allude to him as "an officer and a gentleman."

She had undoubtedly followed her mother's suit—though she had not meant to do so. *Her* "officer and gentleman" was heir to a good property, so strictly entailed that she could (and did) give herself all the haughtiness of an heiress apparent, and felt herself in no wise bound to koo-too to her father-in-law (who was a distinctly unpleasant old person) or treat him to any extra side dishes in the shape of flatteries and attentions.

Unfortunately her husband pre-deceased his father! And when the old man (who detested her) followed him to the family vault three months later, it was found that she was not so much as mentioned in his will.

There had been no settlements. She was very poor, and had been only too glad to marry her husband without them, especially as his father was most averse to the match; and as there were no children

all the property went to the second son, Reginald Greatorrex.

The sorest subject with Agatha's aunt was this brother-in-law. She had treated him very cavalierly, to say the least of it, during her short reign at Medlands, as wife of the elder son; and when Reginald came in for the property he remembered it. He portioned her off with as small a dowry as decency or conscience would allow.

He was a testy, self-contained, old bachelor—and the last of his race—though with a good point here and there. He had been good at all events to John Dillwyn, whose father was the rector of his parish, and whose mother, some said, had been the one love of old Reginald's life. Both father and mother were dead now, and the young man, after a fierce struggle with existence in town, had passed all his exams, and was free to kill or cure any population, anywhere. It was when he stood triumphant, but friendless, and hardly knowing where to set up his tent, that Mr. Greatorrex had come forward, and got him his post at Rickton, where the former had a good deal of property, though Medlands itself lay in an adjoining county.

Mrs. Greatorrex had received the young man coldly. Anyone connected with Reginald must be distasteful to her. To do her justice she had never truckled to her brother-in-law in any way, and had contented herself with undisguised hatred of him. Agatha had nothing to do with him, she thanked heaven—otherwise she could not have supported existence with her. She came from *her* side of the house where people had been officers and—

"Mrs. Darkham looked frightful," said Agatha. "She really did, poor woman. Fancy such a gown—red satin and black velvet—and her face—"

"As red as the satin, no doubt. But is it possible, Agatha, what you tell me? that Richard Browne is staying with those people."

"Those people" were always the Firs-Robinsons with Mrs. Greatorrex. The fact that they could have bought her up a thousand times over at any moment rankled in her mind. She could not forgive them that. If they had been "landed gentry"—a term perpetually on her lips—she would not have minded. But the Firs-Robinsons! She consoled herself with the reflection that when old Firs-Robinson's grandfather was nowhere, her grandfather was an Earl—and when Miss Firs-Robinson's father stood behind a counter, or else was trading in furs, *her* father had been an officer and—

Still in some queer way she hankered after the Robinsons—desiring to know this and that about them, and being, as has been hinted, of a parsimonious turn of mind, did not refrain from accepting from them fruits and flowers and vegetables. Indeed face to face with them she was delightful. She justified herself over this hypocritical turn, and explained herself to Agatha, by quoting St. Paul. "All things to all men," was a motto of his.

"Richard?" questioned Agatha, as if surprised. Indeed, Mrs. Greatorrex was perhaps the only person of his acquaintance who called Mr. Browne "Richard."

"Dicky, you mean?"

"Yes. Of course. He was christened Richard, Agatha. That ought to count. His father's name is Richard."

"It is so funny to think of Dicky's having a father," said Agatha laughing. "What kind is he, Auntie?"

"A mummy! A modern mummy," said Mrs. Greatorex, laying down her sock. "A dandified mummy. All paint and wig and teeth—"

"But a mummy! It wouldn't have—"

"Yes, I know. But there's nothing in him! Nothing that is his own. He is padded and stuffed, and perfumed. He"—indignantly—"ought to have died ten years ago, and yet he now goes about the world rejuvenated yearly. Only last month I had a letter from a friend of mine, saying Richard's father had come back from the German spas, describing himself as 'a giant refreshed.' Just fancy that, at seventy-eight."

"I always feel I could love old Mr. Browne," said Agatha, laughing still.

"You must have precious little to love," said her aunt, knitting vigorously. She had known old Mr. Browne in her youth.

Agatha's laughter came to a sudden end. She sprang to her feet.

"Here is Edwy Darkham," said she, moving to the window. "And looking so wild. Aunt Hilda, do come here. Oh!" anxiously, "surely there is something wrong with him."

Across the lawn, running uncouthly, hideously—rolling from side to side, yet with astonishing speed, the idiot came. His huge head was thrown up, and the beauty that was in his face when it was in repose was now all gone. He was mouthing horribly, and inarticulate cries seemed to be bursting from his lips. The terrible rapidity with which he ran had somewhat

deprived him of breath, yet still he seemed to make frantic efforts to shout something as he came. When beginning his mad race no doubt these shouts—so shocking from the dumb—were loud and horrifying. Now they were horrifying still, but lower; they came in gasps.

It was frightful to see him approaching thus, with his great arms spread like sails, and his big, strong, clumsy body flying between them.

Agatha, struck by the great terror that so evidently possessed him, conquered all fear, and springing out of the low French window, ran to meet him.

At times she shrank from him—not always. Deep pity for him lay within her heart, because he was so docile, and because he clung to her so, poor thing! and seemed to find such comfort in her presence. She had been specially kind in her manner to his mother often because of him, and perhaps that kindness to her—the mother—whom the poor, handsome, ill-shapen idiot adored, had been the first cause of his affection for Agatha. She had always been good to Edwy, in spite of her detestation of his father, and now when the unhappy creature was in such evident trouble—a trouble that rendered him a thousand times more repulsive than usual—she lost her fear of him and ran down the balcony steps to meet him.

He was unhappy!—this poor boy, whose soul was but an empty shell. What ailed him? All her young, strong, gentle heart went out to him.

“Edwy! Edwy!” cried she, as eloquently as though he could hear her.

He rushed to her and caught her arm, and sank on his knees before her.

"Sho! Sho! Sho!" he yelled.

It was his one word—that was *no* word—but to him it meant the best word of all—"mother."

Agatha understood him. She pressed his poor head against her arm.

"What is it? What is it, Edwy?" asked she. There was quick anxiety in her tone.

Her voice was unheard by him, but his eyes followed hers and the movement of her lips; some thread in his weak brain caught at the meaning of her words. In spite of the exhaustion that followed on his run here—a matter of four miles during which the poor idiot had evidently shouted that one strange syllable all the way—his strength had not yet quite deserted him.

He turned suddenly to Agatha and clasped her. His fingers clutched her, and closed upon both her arms. The pain was excessive—almost beyond bearing—and Agatha tried to shake herself free. But after a first effort she checked herself; the agony in the poor boy's face—usually so expressionless—moved her so powerfully, that she stood still, bearing the pain courageously.

She managed to lay her hand, however, on the large bony one (so singularly muscular) that was grasping her right arm, and after a moment or two Edwy relaxed his hold.

"Aunt Hilda," cried Agatha, turning to the window. "What *can* be the matter?" But Mrs. Greatorrex, who had carefully taken refuge behind the window curtains (from which safety point she could see without being

seen), declined to leave her shelter to solve the problem offered her.

"Send him away!—send him away!" she screamed, dramatically, safe in the knowledge that the idiot could not hear her. "He has reached his climax; he is going mad. I can see it in his eyes. He'll murder you if you encourage him any further. Get rid of him, Agatha, I implore you, before he does any mischief."

"Oh, no, it isn't that. It is only that he is in terrible distress about something. I am quite sure there is cause for it; but I don't know how to find out what it is."

At this moment Edwy rose to his feet, and approaching her, began to gesticulate violently and make loud guttural sounds. In vain Agatha tried to understand him. Finally, as if dimly aware that his cries and gestures conveyed no meaning to her, the idiot seized her by both arms and turned her in the direction from which he had just come. Then he waited a moment, but seeing her immovable, an access of fury seemed to take hold of him, and catching her by her arm and shoulder he began to drag her forcibly along with him, so forcibly that Agatha felt she had no power to battle with him, and that it would be useless to resist.

She did resist, however, with all her might, useless as it was. She could hardly believe it possible that any human thing could so easily overcome her. She herself was young, strong, and lithe, but this squat, broad creature, over whose head she could look, held her powerless in his grasp.

With fierce impatience he hurried her forward, in

spite of her now almost frantic struggles to free herself from the clasp of his long arms. There was no rancour, however, in his manner; only an overpowering desire to take her to some place, on which whatever mind he had was set.

God knows what thoughts were in the poor creature's heart! His eyes were always staring straight before him, as though he were looking at something that affrighted him. His strength was superhuman, and he had now dragged Agatha with him half across the lawn. She could not reason with him, as he could not hear, and she felt her strength grow less every moment. Where was he going? Where was he taking her?

She looked down at the stunted figure beside her, at the rough, unkempt head. She felt the long, sinewy arms tighten round her, and suddenly a sensation of faintness overcame her. What was it her aunt had said? That he was mad! That he would murder somebody! Was he going to murder *her*?

By this time Mrs. Greatorex's terrified shrieks were resounding across the lawn. But the servants, two small maidens, were evidently too frightened to attempt a rescue. They hung back, and clung to each other, and whimpered sympathetically. They wept and were useless, as is their little way—all over this world at all events.

In the meantime, Agatha had been dragged to the borders of the wood beyond—a dense mass of foliage, belonging to the neighbour who lived next to Mrs. Greatorex. Another minute would take her out of the view of those watching from the windows.

And in the dark recesses of that wood.

CHAPTER IX.

“Fear not, my sweet, I should betray
The love I bear thee in my lays,
Howe’er my lips may overflow
With thy matchless beauty’s praise.

Beneath a thicket all of flowers,
Hidden from all envious blame,
Lies, my love, that burning secret,
Burns, my love, that secret flame.”

AT this moment a young man pushed his way vigorously through a thick hedge of laurel, and springing forward intercepted the idiot. He stood before him in an authoritative manner, and made a strange little gesture. Evidently Edwy understood it. He came to a sudden standstill.

The new-comer was Dr. Dillwyn. He went up to the poor boy and laid his hand upon his shoulder and made a sign or two to him with his fingers. Edwy let Agatha go, and the girl, sick and faint with terror, fell back against a tree behind her.

The idiot caught Dillwyn by the shoulder, looking up at him and mouthing beseechingly.

“Sho! Sho! Sho!” moaned he.

He had now, however, grown calmer; and presently his face regained its usual placid look. Dillwyn’s appearance had had some extraordinary effect upon him. The terror disappeared from his eyes, and they were

now fixed on the young doctor with the steady gaze of a dumb animal. They were large beautiful eyes, like a dog's—but alas, unlike a dog's, they were expressionless.

The poor idiot had learned in some blind way to like and believe in Dillwyn. In the same strange unreasoning fashion, he had grown to like Agatha. These two he clung to, of all those that surrounded him in his silent life. There was another, and that was “Sho;” the ugly, illiterate, vulgar virago who was his mother. To him, however, she was light and life, and all things. Her alone he *loved*! And she loved him. That cord caught and bound them each to each. And now “Sho” was in danger—was lying there at home in a darkened room silent, without a look, a word for him, for the first time in all his blighted existence. It was to that darkened room he would have carried Agatha, some unformed thought of help for his mother stirring him.

He did not know it, but despair had seized upon him. His sole joy in his solitary life was at death's door. If she were to “go beyond these voices here,” who would be left behind to defend him from the whips and scourges of outrageous fortune? He, who was mindless—soundless—voiceless—would be left to fight his own terrible way through an indifferent world!

Not a smile or caress had been given to him all day. To him, to whom caresses were unknown, save for those that *she* gave him. The idiot's heart was heavy.

Again Dillwyn made some signs, pointing towards the direction from which the unfortunate lad had come,

and after a minute or two the idiot turned and shuffled rapidly away towards his home.

Dillwyn went towards Agatha. His face was as white as death. He caught her hand.

"You are not hurt? He did not hurt you? You——"

He paused as if unable to go on, his eyes were fixed on hers. She felt that he was trembling even more than she was. His breath was coming and going quickly. He let her hand go, and it occurred to the girl (it was but a passing thought, and she always blushed afterwards when she dwelt upon it), but it *did* occur to her that he made a step towards her with his arms a little outheld, as though he would have clasped her to his heart if he had dared. Her late danger had perhaps made him bolder—for the moment. He could dare the strong idiot, but what man could dare his love?

"Don't be frightened," said he in a low tone. "He meant nothing. Nothing really. But I thank God I arrived in time. You must have had a great shock."

"Yes, yes," said Agatha, who was trembling still. The tears rose to her eyes. "I am not really a coward," said she, very bravely, "and at first I didn't mind. I bore it quite well, but he was so strong, and I didn't know where he was going, and," with a shudder, "it was so horrid being rushed along like that, and I—know he meant nothing bad, poor boy, and I didn't really think he meant to murder me, and—I really *am* courageous by nature, and—" Here she covered her eyes with her hands and burst into tears. "Oh! now you will think me a coward," sobbed she, like any child.

"I know what I think you, long ago," said Dillwyn. His voice was almost harsh. A great strain was on him: but he was a strong man and he bore it. Why should he push his suit now?—now when she was in extremity as it were, unnerved and frightened. No, he would wait—until she had waited too—long enough to know him, and her own mind with regard to him, and until fortune had smiled on him a little.

"Let me tell you how it all was," said he. "And sit down while I tell you; you are quite unstrung, and no wonder. You are, in my opinion, the bravest girl I ever met."

She looked up at him at this as if comforted, and smiled a little.

"Oh, no!" said she.

"The bravest girl I ever met," repeated he firmly. "Poor Edwy! Who would not be horrified by him, in his excited moments? But the fact is, his mother has met with an accident, and is, I fear, at death's door."

"Mrs. Darkham!" Agatha roused herself from her nervous agitation, and looked at him. She was evidently shocked.

"Yes. She went out early this morning, shopping or marketing or something, in the town, and coming down that hilly part of the High-street she slipped on an orange peel and came with fearful force upon the flags. You know what a heavy woman she is."

"Yes,—yes. Poor thing!"

"She was taken home quite insensible. Darkham was out, but was sent for"—Dillwyn was glad to see that his story had roused her, and taken away her thoughts from her late unpleasant encounter with the

poor idiot—"and it appears it was some time before he returned. In the meantime poor Edwy had crept into the room where she was lying, and the servants told me the sight of the blood—she had cut the back of her head slightly (it would have been better if the cut had been greater, it would have granted more relief, but you see the pillow was stained) and the blood affected Edwy horribly. First he flew to her, and then recoiled; they said he did not know her, lying there so still."

"It was not that——"

"No, of course not. His manner afterwards disproved that. He went away, but came back again and flung himself upon her, and great, difficult tears fell from his eyes. I was there then, and so was the father. It was pitiful beyond words. I raised him and tried to——"

"And his father——"

"He——" Dillwyn looked confused. "Of course he was, as you may imagine, entirely taken up with his wife."

"No. I could *not* imagine that," said Agatha, without a moment's pause. "And the poor boy——"

"He got up suddenly and ran round the bed to me. He took my arm and pointed to the door. I did not understand him. I wish I had. I believe now he was trying to tell me that he was going to bring you to the succour of his mother."

"Poor, poor boy!" Agatha sighed, quickly. "It is not hopeless, at all events?" questioned she.

"Who can say? Darkham thinks it is, and I—well—I have seen cases as bad recover. But that is nothing. It is undoubtedly a very bad case. She is a heavy

woman, you know, and a fall like that—and concussion—I am going up there again this evening in consultation with—”

“With?”

“Doctor Bland, of Bigton.” Bigton was the next town.

“Ah!” said Agatha, quickly. There was relief in her tone. She could not have explained it to herself, but she was glad that so respectable a man as Dr. Bland had been called in for consultation. She distrusted Dr. Darkham, and if afterwards enquiries were made, might not the man now standing near her be—well—implicated perhaps?—and would that not be prejudicial to his career?

Dillwyn looked at her, questioningly. “You thought it would be some other man?” asked he.

“Yes. But I am glad it is Dr. Bland. He—”

“Is not so old as most of the old figure-heads in the county,” said Dillwyn with a smile, who had suffered a good deal from the medical fossils in the surrounding neighbourhood, since he came to Rickton. “Darkham sent for me first. I was the nearest, you know.”

“Yes,” said Agatha. “And the cleverest,” she would have added had she dared to give her heart *carte blanche*.”

“It was all very sad, and the poor boy so helpless. I am sure I am reading the riddle correctly when I say he ran to you to get you to come to his mother in her extremity—”

“I wish I had gone,” said Agatha, quickly. She half rose. “Oh, perhaps I ought to go. Has she no woman with her?”

"She has two!" said Dillwyn, quietly. "You would be in the way, if you went there now. Two nurses engaged by Darkham are in constant attendance on her. Don't distress yourself about that—and will you think of yourself a little now? If you won't I shall think *for* you. You must go back to the house, and to your room, and try to sleep, if possible, for the next two or three hours."

"As for that!" said she—a faint laugh broke from her.

"You won't do what I tell you then?" said he. He had taken her hand as if to draw it within his arm, but he held it now in his own whilst questioning her.

"To do what you tell me?" She reddened vividly.

"Yes, why not?" His tone was calm, but the hand clasping hers tightened its grasp. It was as though he could not let her go.

There was a pause. Agatha made an effort to draw her hand from his, but he held it manfully.

"Why shouldn't you do what is good for you?" asked he at last. "And what is the good of a doctor if he can't suggest useful remedies? I am a doctor, and therefore why shouldn't you do what I tell you?"

"Oh! if you put it that way!" said she.

"Then you are going to obey me?"

She gave him a little glance.

At this they both laughed, Agatha still a little nervously. She did not, however, resist him any further, and presently he had taken her back across the lawn and on to the balcony, where Mrs. Greatorex met them.

She had seen Dillwyn spring through the laurels,

and had known Agatha was safe. She met him now with extended hand.

"Thank you a thousand times, Dr. Dillwyn," said she, "for your happy appearance on the scene a moment ago. I warned Agatha about that repulsive boy, but she would not listen to me. However, I am sure there was nothing really serious about it."

Her manner was kind, but reserved. She had noticed his attentions to Agatha, and was not yet sure whether they ought to be encouraged or rejected. Time would tell. She must wait and see how his practice got on, whether it increased or decreased.

He was poor, and though Reginald Greatorrex had, in a sense, placed him here, still, she knew that "old skinflint"—I regret that that was the name she applied to her brother-in-law in her private hours—was certainly not to be depended upon. This rather presumptuous young doctor would never get a penny out of Reginald Greatorrex, if he hoped for a thousand years. Had *she* not hoped?

And yet, though she assured herself Dillwyn had no chance of old Reginald's money, still the very fact that he *might* have a chance rendered the young man distasteful in her eyes. A *protégé* of Reginald's would always be a blurr upon the landscape of her life.

"No, I think not," said Dillwyn; "yet your niece has certainly been subjected to a severe shock. That unfortunate boy was greatly disturbed in mind, and, as it appears, ran to Miss Nesbitt at once for comfort. He meant nothing beyond a desire to gain help for his mother, who is very ill."

"Mrs. Darkham is ill?"

"Yes, seriously so."

"Good heavens! Nothing infectious, I hope? Oh, Agatha! And you have been with her son just now. My dear,"—drawing herself back hurriedly—"had you not better go in, and get disinfected?—Sulphur is very good, and——"

"I don't think you need be alarmed in this instance," said Dillwyn, coldly; "concussion of the brain is not catching."

At this moment the sound of footsteps on the gravel outside could be heard, and a laugh—gay, sweet.

CHAPTER X.

"Death and Life are in the power of the tongue."

THEY all looked over the balcony. Yes, there were visitors arriving; Mrs. Greatorrex herself, in the excitement of the moment, had forgotten that it was her day at home, but her friends had not.

Round the corner now came the elder Miss Firs-Robinson, with Elfrida in her train, and Mr. Blount, the curate, in Elfrida's. And after them a young man—rather short and stout, with clothes that suggested London—and an unfathomable air. It was Mr. Browne, who, when anything was on, could never keep his finger out of the pie.

Mrs. Greatorrex turned quickly to Agatha.

"Not a word about that wretched idiot," she said, in a low tone. "And stay for awhile; the servants will

be sure to talk and I should like these people, who," with a contemptuous shrug, "are inveterate gossips, to see that nothing really has happened. You know what Rickton is, and how they will delight in making one tragedy follow upon another. They will say that unfortunate creature murdered you, if you give them the slightest opening."

"But your niece——" protested Dillwyn, seeing Agatha's exhausted air.

"Would, I am sure, prefer anything to vulgar curiosity about her," put in Mrs. Greatorrex, haughtily.

"My aunt is right," said Agatha quickly, fearing a collision between the two—the young doctor's eyes indeed were burning fiercely. She moved forward at once to meet the coming guests, who were now mounting the steps of the balcony, acquiescing with quite a Spartan determination in her aunt's decision, though Dillwyn could see that her face was very white, and that she was sadly shaken. She, however, greeted old Miss Firs-Robinson with calm courtesy and kissed Elfrida—Elfrida who looked back at her keenly for a moment—then pressed her into a seat beside her, and pulled up a cushion behind her back. It occurred to Dillwyn that he rather liked Elfrida. He bade good-bye to Mrs. Greatorrex, who seemed delighted to say good-bye to him. And another good-bye to Agatha, holding her hand until he met her eyes—after which he went on his way rejoicing.

As he went another guest came. Lord Ambert.

Mrs. Greatorrex received him with effusion and gave him a chair near herself.

"A frightful thing, dear Mrs. Greatorrex," said Miss Firs-Robinson! She sank into a wicker seat upon the balcony with tremendous effect. Everyone thought the balcony was going down. Providentially it rebounded from the shock and was itself again!

"A frightful thing indeed!" said Mr. Browne, who had subsided near Agatha and Elfrida. "It has been a most merciful deliverance. I thought we were all going to the lower regions, didn't you?"

"After all it wouldn't be far!" said Agatha, thinking of the depth of the small balcony—one so near the ground.

"My dear girl, consider! Even the very doughtiest scientists have failed to find the number of descending acres that divide our comparatively pleasant home from——"

"From what?"

"Well," said Mr. Browne. "Really I hardly like to name it in a select assembly like this. But I believe nasty people call it—hell!"

"Oh, Dicky," said Agatha.

He was an old friend of hers. He was an old friend of a lot of people. One had only to know Dicky Browne for ten days to be quite a century old friend of his. At this moment Lord Ambert strolled towards them and up to Elfrida.

"I knew it would startle you, but you insisted," said Dicky Browne, reproachfully.

"What nonsense," said Elfrida. "You know Auntie was talking of this sad affair about Mrs. Darkham."

"Yes," said the curate, gravely. "She is dying, I hear, poor soul."

"Oh, no," from all, which did not mean a contradiction.

"I am sorry to say it is true. I heard this morning there was no hope."

"After all, she is no great loss," said Elfrida, with a sort of determination in her tone. Was it a determination to disgust Tom Blount? To turn him from her—to let her conscience go free, so that she might go her own way and marry a man for position for whom she did not care one iota.

"She *is* a loss," said the curate, defying her valiantly, openly, and to her face. His defiance might mean the destruction of all his life's happiness, yet he insisted, though he had set his heart on this small, wilful beauty, who gave him now and then a word or two, and now and then a smile. "She will be a loss to that poor son of hers, whom Heaven, in a wisdom unknown to us, has afflicted."

"Oh, *you* know everything," said Elfrida, with a shrug of her dainty shoulders. She almost turned her back on him.

Lord Ambert came forward and whispered a word or two in her ear. She laughed. The curate fell back. Dicky Browne laying a hand upon his arm, drew him away from the group and into the shadow of some large tubs filled with shrubs.

Miss Firs-Robinson had been giving a loose rein to her sympathetic tendencies. And to Mrs. Greatorrex!

"A shocking affair! Poor dear creature! Rather—er—behind-hand in some little ways—but such an end! Of course, Dr. Dillwyn has told you all the facts of the

case, but the details—they are so interesting, but no doubt you've heard 'em."

Mrs. Greatorrex, who would have given worlds to say she had, was so carried away by her desire to learn the smallest minutiae of the tragedy upon the *spot* (to-morrow it would be a mere *rechauffé*—to-day it would be a first dish) that she gave way, and confessed that she knew little or nothing of the terrible affair that was now convulsing the neighbourhood. Nothing at all. She made the handsome admission with quite an air, however; an air that at once conveyed the impression that she was above gossip and lived in a select atmosphere of her own, into which the little trifling affairs of her neighbours were not permitted to enter. She did it admirably, but she played rather above the head of her companion, who did not understand her in the least.

"Law, my dear, how out of the world you are," said that worthy, with a patronising smile that filled the soul of Mrs. Greatorrex with wrath. "Well, I keep my eyes open and my ears too, and now I'll tell you."

Mrs. Greatorrex made a movement, as if to crush her with a well-applied word or two, but she checked herself. If she offended old Miss Firs-Robinson, she would learn nothing about Mrs. Darkham's accident. If she endured her in silence all the gossip of the neighbourhood would be hers in five minutes. And five minutes was not long to endure anyone. Dr. Dillwyn had been vague, and too much taken up with Agatha (she would have to put an end to that presently) to tell her anything worth hearing, and so she had heard nothing beyond the mere fact of the fall.

"Yes?" said she carefully. Tea had been brought

out by one of the small maids, who had now ceased from her trembling, and Mrs. Greatorrex stood up to pour it out.

"She's dying," said Miss Firs-Robinson. "Not a doubt of it! She's heavy, you know; and her head came with an awful thud on the ground. Concussion, that's what it is. They say the boy—that unfortunate creature, you know—was in a frightful state, but," leaning forward and putting her hand genteelly to the corner of her mouth, "They do say that the husband bore it wonderfully."

"Scandalous gossip!" said Mrs. Greatorrex, drawing back and letting the tea overflow in the cup.

"Why?" asked Miss Firs-Robinson, who, if a gossip, was at all events not a hypocrite. "I should think he'd be glad enough to get rid of her—decently, you know, decently."

"Dear Miss Firs-Robinson—surely you don't quite mean what you say."

"Indeed I do, my dear. If people are tied together and don't like each other they had better be separated."

"Good Heavens! this is heresy," said Mr. Browne. "You'll get taken up, Miss Robinson, if you don't look out."

"Not me," said the old maid, with her loud, hearty laugh. "No such luck. Nobody ever wanted me in all my born days, except 'Frida. And I stick to what I say. It's my opinion that poor Mrs. Darkham didn't have altogether a good time with her husband."

"Ah! you are evidently prejudiced," said Mrs. Greatorrex, sweetly. "And prejudiced people, you know, have no opinions."

"I don't agree with you there."

"It is true, nevertheless. They merely adopt the thoughts of those who think as they do, and suit their opinions to their likes and dislikes. Unbiassed judgment is beyond them."

"Then I'm not prejudiced," said old Miss Firs-Robinson with another laugh. "Your words prove it, because I beg you to understand I have as sound an opinion as any one I know, on most matters. And I don't suit it to my likes or dislikes either, because I never could bear Mrs. Darkham; yet I think there is some good in her."

"Who is Mrs. Darkham?" asked Mr. Browne. "That big red woman with the voice of a costermonger I met here last year?"

"Yes. She slipped on an orange peel yesterday, and is now hardly expected to recover."

"After all, there is something in orange peel," said Mr. Browne, thoughtfully.

"You think her death will be welcomed by some people?" asked Miss Firs-Robinson, pushing up her pince-nez into better position for battle. She had always suspected Mrs. Darkham's relations with her husband; though evidently Mrs. Greatorrex had not. But if Dicky is going to be on her side . . .

"By herself! Herself!" said Mr. Browne, severely. "Just think of the burden she has had to carry about with her for all these past years."

"There, you see!" cried Miss Firs-Robinson, triumphantly, to Mrs. Greatorrex. "Dicky has noticed it too."

It was delightful to her to know that somebody

besides herself had seen that the poor woman now lying low had not been altogether kindly treated by her husband.

"I don't know what he has noticed," said Mrs. Greatorrex, coldly. "And I think, Richard," casting a chilly glance at Mr. Browne, who took it and apparently was lost in wonder over it, "it would be wiser if you abstained from open condemnation of things of which you know absolutely nothing!"

"I'm in it as usual," said Mr. Browne, with an air of tender resignation. "But why these cold glances? I've seen her, you know, and seeing is believing. Surely I must know something—some little thing!"

"Of course," said Miss Firs-Robinson, triumphantly. "To see her was enough, poor creature! So dull—so sat upon——!"

"Did he do that?" asked Mr. Browne, with perhaps rather too lively an interest. "Dared he to sit upon her? Well, she'd tempt one that way, you know."

"I agree with you, Richard," said Mrs. Greatorrex, with a friendly inclination towards him.

"Dicky does not mean that," said Miss Firs-Robinson, angrily. "He knows, because I've told him, that her husband made her life a burden to her."

"Oh! but really, it was her flesh I alluded to, you know, not her husband—not her husband, you know!" said Mr. Browne, with a reproachful glance at the irate dames on his left—and a sharp attack on the sponge cake on his right. The tea-table is fatally near him. "Her . . . Eh? . . Well, it must be a burden to her, you know, and no doubt, poor creature, she'll be glad to lay it down!"

He has now got a considerable portion of the sponge cake in his possession, and is waxing quite Christian in his air and smile. The smile indeed is seraphic.

"I believe you've been taking us in all the time," said Miss Firs-Robinson at last. She was broad-minded, and could laugh at her own small defeats at times. Mrs. Greatorrex could not, however, and had turned away, and was talking to Lord Ambert, who was giving her rather curt replies, as he wanted to make the running with the small heiress as strong as possible, and grudged a moment taken from his stride. The small heiress, who was flirting assiduously with the unfortunate curate, was well aware of his impatience with Mrs. Greatorrex, and laughed in her dainty lace sleeves about it.

"I am afraid Auntie is not orthodox," said she, looking at Tom Blount, who was still hovering round her, out of two very unorthodox blue eyes. She was alluding to her Aunt's late openly-expressed opinion that married people unsuited to each other were better apart. "Are you, Auntie?"

Auntie drew near at this challenge; when would she not draw near when that pretty voice summoned her?

"I don't know what I am," said that stout lady, with a beneficent smile. "But 'pon my word if it came to living with Dr. Darkham all my life I'd cry 'No thank you!'"

"Oh! Auntie, now you are giving yourself away indeed. You are uncharitable, and Mr. Blount will put you down as incorrigible," said her niece, retreating behind the fan she held, as if horrified.

Evidently she was ashamed of herself, thought her aunt. Blount, however, was filled with unhappy certainty that she was laughing.

"Don't mind her, Mr. Blount," said old Miss Robinson, very kindly. "I know you won't do anything of the kind."

"Ah, Lord Ambert—going?"

"Yes—aw—just dropped in for a moment, you know. Good-bye," to Elfrida, who smiled at him. "See you at the Stackford's on Tuesday?"

"I think not." She still smiled at him, her lovely little face a picture. "This sudden illness of Mrs. Darkham's—it casts a sort of gloom, you see."

"Yes; it would be inhuman," said the curate, suddenly, "to go to a tennis party or a party of any kind, when that poor woman is lying at death's door."

"A merely plebeian idea, I assure you, Miss Robinson," said Ambert, taking Elfrida's hand and pressing it in a tender fashion. "I trust you will not let yourself be influenced by it, and that I shall see you on Tuesday." He paused. "I shall see you to-morrow at all events!"

He pressed her hand again, bowed to Agatha—he had already made his adieux to Mrs. Greatorrex—gave a nod to Dicky Browne, who seemed delighted with him in some strange way, and without so much as a glance at the curate, though certainly courtesy demanded as much as that, he went his way.

CHAPTER XI.

“Think, timely think, on the last dreadful day,
How you will tremble there to stand exposed,
The foremost in the rank of guilty ghosts
That must be doomed for murder!—think on murder!

It was quite true; Mrs. Darkham was at the very portals of death. Whether those great gates were to be opened for her, or she could be dragged back from them, was the question that troubled the physicians who attended her.

Perhaps it troubled her husband more than them. He was sitting now in his library, in the big chair, with his arms hanging listlessly over the arms of it, and his head pushed somewhat forward. He was thinking.

The doctors had come and gone, and both were agreed. It was almost an impossibility, but not quite; she might, if such and such a change occurred, live. If not, death lay before her—a death into which she would enter without revisiting, even in thought, this world again. Dr. Bland, an elderly man, and one of great and deserved reputation, gave it as his opinion that if death did not ensue in a very few hours hope might be entertained by her—friends! He had looked rather directly at Darkham—at the husband—as he said this. Dillwyn had nodded an assent, and had said a few words, too—to the effect that such grave

cases *had* been known to recover even after hope seemed at an end. He had kept his eyes carefully averted from the husband of the injured woman whilst saying this. He had looked at him when first he entered the room, but he could not trust himself to look again. There was something terrible in Darkham's face, something hungry, ravenous. An animal stalking its prey might have looked like that.

And now Darkham sat alone in his library thinking—thinking. They had given it as their opinion that she would die—those two who had left—that she *would die!* Would leave him free! Free of her accursed company!

A sort of fierce joy rose up and seized upon him. It caught and shook him! Free! Free! After all these years! Free! She was dying. Surely, certainly! In a few hours her breath would cease, and no more would her odious, vulgar words and accents make him shrink and shudder. She would be gone to the Great Unknown, and he——.

And it would be none of his doing! None! Here the great passionate joy that thrilled him seemed to culminate. He would be rid of her, without a single effort of his own. Had he even dreamed of making an effort? He would be quit of her in an hour or two—a day at latest. Surely the stars in their courses were fighting for him!

What was it they had said, those two? that if—— if—— he pressed his hands, both of them, to his head—that if she lasted until morning she might recover! Fools! She would not recover. Death was on her face when last he saw her. Pshaw! he was a better

judge than either of them. Bland—an old man—too old—and Dillwyn—a young idiot, who followed his leader naturally! But he—he knew!—He who was in the prime of life, and had studied death—and life—in all their varied ways.

Yes, he knew! Siva, the Destroyer, lay hovering above the woman—whom the law called his wife—with outspread wings, awaiting the moment to descend and clutch his prey. Soon—soon—let it be!

Oh! to be delivered from her! From this creature who made life a torture—who had dragged him with a chain all these interminable years—the years of a marriage that had damned him. When he could have risen, that chain had nailed him to the earth, had clipped his soaring wings; had withered every moment of his life. Truly a young man starting in life should look well to the way he is going, and should choose a wife meet for him. Marriage is not for an hour but for all eternity—sometimes!

This one however! It will not last so long. This marriage will end soon, thank——

He broke off abruptly. Who was he thanking?

He rose suddenly and went to the door. He would go upstairs and see how things were going on. He shook a little as he put his foot upon the first step of the stairs, and looked back as if he would willingly change his mind and return to the library. But he overcame himself, and went steadily upstairs. A terrible longing to make sure carried him upward to the silent chamber, though *he* hardly confessed this to himself. He told himself that the nurses might wonder

and talk if he did not show some attention to that hideous lay figure in the bed up there.

So he went, and entered the room, and beckoned to the nurse in charge that she need not stay. She rose at his bidding, and slipped through the farther door, glad enough to get away for an hour or so. Her employer was a doctor and the husband of the sick woman under her charge, and so she felt safe in leaving her. Besides which it was a hopeless case. The nurse had seen many such in the London hospitals, and though some as bad had pulled through, still the percentage lay the other way.

Darkham went up to where the silent figure lay, and ruthlessly pulled back one of the curtains at the end of the old-fashioned bedstead. It was a four-poster of great size, and had been in the house when he had taken it. It had not been exchanged for another more modern, as Mrs. Darkham, having been accustomed to that sort of cumbrous bedstead in her lowly youth had clung to it ever since. She would have that room for her own, she said; and Darkham knew it was because of the bedstead.

The light from the dying day streamed in through the window and lay on the dull, yellow face that rested on the pillow. It lit it up and showed it in all its ugliness.

Darkham bent over it—lower—lower still, and looked—and looked again. Was there a change?—*was* there?

Already the face looked like that of a corpse. The lips were a little parted, as if the strength to close them

was gone, and the upper teeth showed through them in a ghastly fashion.

And yet it seemed to the husband bending over her that there was some slight return of strength, of consciousness, in the face beneath him. It was so slight as to be all but unseen by any, save one passionately interested either in her recovery or her death! If, after all—

He bent still lower, and then raised himself with a frown and a quick sigh. No, he had been mistaken. Death would be her portion this night. The two men who had just left had said it; well, they were right. She would die to-night.

He sat down in a distant arm-chair that still gave him a full view of the bed, and gazed with an uncompromising sternness at the form thereon. How hideous she was, with the dropping mouth, the yellow pallor, the dull buff of the hair, and the heavy fat cheeks! A very hatred of her sent a strong shudder through him. Heavens! how he hated her—alive as well as now—half dead! *Half dead!*

He fell a-musing again. How deathlike she looked. How close to the last breath. Just a step one way or the other—this way to life, that way to the grave. A touch, a single movement, and she would be beyond the line that divides the darkness from the light.

Great Heavens! how, even in the helplessness of her, her face retains its old expression. The vulgar sneer still dominates it, the drawn lips are still replete with venom. What a life he has had with her—a life? nay a death.

And now, when death takes *her*, life may still be

open to *him*. Life enough—long enough—to grasp some sweet remnant of happiness out of the passing years.

The night was descending, but out of the misty darkness of the room a girl's face stood—calm, cold, lovely. There from the end of the room it looked at him, the eyes shining clear as day and full of truth. They called to him, they beckoned him, they tempted him.

He turned uneasily, and rose and began to pace the room, stealthily, silently, yet with a sort of cruel spring in every step. It was as though he could hardly keep himself in—as if some vitality within him was at work, and urged him forward—forward—always forward.

Why had the accident been so slow a thing? Death, instantaneous death—how much more merciful it would have been to her—to him. A heavier fall, by half an inch or so, and all would have been at an end; there would have been no more room left for doubt—for fear—or for joy! He did not mince matters to himself, as he walked there, to and fro like a caged lion. He was strong enough to tell himself the truth.

He stopped himself in his strange hurrying up and down, and once more approached the bed. He bent over her, and lifted her hand that lay so miserably helpless within his, and then let it fall again. It sank upon the coverlet with a little dull thud, scarce audible, save to him whose ears were strained to hear, whose senses were so preternaturally on the alert. Why had her head been so hard, or else those flags so soft! A less thing had killed a score of fools before this.

Something in her face again arrested him. Surely there was a change. He placed his ear close to her

mouth, and listened. When he uplifted himself presently, his face had taken a greyish tinge. Her breath was certainly stronger and steadier.

He went back to the armchair, and seated himself slowly in it. He recalled to his mind what Dillwyn had said—that such a case as his wife's had been known to defy all the laws of nature, and assert its mastery over death. Was she going to defy nature and death and—*him?*

He rose, as though he found it impossible to be still, and laid his hand upon the mantelpiece; his grasp was so hard that his knuckles stood out white against the black marble. That devil, Dillwyn, had said she might recover. No doubt his hope was father to his opinion. He would do him, Darkham, a bad turn wherever he could. There had been occasions lately in the neighbourhood when this young fool thought—strove—to wrestle with him in professional matters. There was that affair of General Montgomery's the day before last, when Dillwyn had been called in to the Cedars. The general was an important person in the place, and though scarcely *en rapport* with Darkham, had generally employed him up to this, and Darkham had *ground* a little from his rival's success in that quarter. Now, in this extreme moment all that came back to him. He thought of Dillwyn, of Agatha's face as he had seen it at Miss Firs-Robinson's dance—looking into Dillwyn's—of the preference shown to the latter by General Montgomery, and a few other unimportant people,—but people who always mean the thin end of the wedge in such affairs, and his clasp upon the arms of the chair grew tighter. He was looking at the faded

carpet, but he did not see it. He saw only Dillwyn. What! Was he to supplant him these two times?

Dillwyn had said she might recover! Might! Should she? If she did not—why in that case he could write him down an ass? It would enable him to injure that presumptuous young fool in his profession. He could take care to spread the thing, to let people know what his opinion had been, and the result. . . . Why, it might be the death of Dillwyn in his profession
Death!

He broke off and glanced again at the bed, this time hurriedly, shortly. He saw her there, motionless, torpid, her sullen breaths coming with strange trouble from her breast. When would they cease! That was the one thought. When they ceased he would be free. Free!

A wild throb of exultation rose, and almost burst his heaving chest. In that moment he felt mad. Mad with the sense of freedom, that strongest of all feelings. It dwelt with him, and throve, and grew, and filled his being, until at last a sharp laugh broke from him, that filled the silent room and rang and echoed as though all the demons in Hell had given tongue to it. It was frightful. It sobered even him. He stopped short and fell back against the wall nearest to him, shaking still with his untimely mirth, but silent now, his hands clutching a chair to steady himself, his eyes always on the face that lay so deadly still amongst the pillows.

Presently he crept towards her again—and again bent over her and listened. He had *not* been mistaken then! Yes, the breath was stronger—he even imagined

now that her hand stirred a little. He stood up. A minute passed in which he hardly breathed.

In that minute he knew what he was going to do!

CHAPTER XII.

“Oh, horror! horror! horror! Tongue nor heart
Cannot conceive nor name thee.”

HE went back to his chair again, however, and fought it out with himself. Pah! what was it after all but to bring to a quicker end a life that the doctors had all but declared gone. What *was* it they had said? He flung back his head and stared at the ceiling striving to remember. His thoughts were a little unmanageable, and it took him some time to recall Dillwyn's exact words, though they had been on the tip of his tongue all through. So deep was the intensity of his desire to go back to that consultation of the two doctors and their verdict that he hardly heard a faint movement in the room, a slow stirring of the curtains that half hid the bed,—that hideous bed, with its still more hideous occupant.

At last he remembered. If she were to live for a certain number of hours there might be hope—a vague hope truly, said Doctor Bland, and not to be depended on, but a hope. If not, she must die. She had lived for many hours now, almost to the time mentioned, and *still* she breathed. Yet what a faint breathing; even if she *did* live for a little while the doctors had said—Dillwyn especially had insisted upon it—that her

recovery would still be most doubtful. But—his face grew harder—there *was* a doubt.

The nurse came to the door and opened it. He recollected himself in a moment, but hardly dared turn his face to hers. He told her by a motion of his hand, a softly muttered word, to go away; that the patient was still doing well, that he had hopes, that he wished to stay there. And the woman withdrew, praising him in her heart as a husband full of love and grief and anguish.

It was a slight interruption, but it half maddened him for the moment, although his iron nerve carried him through it. Then he went back to his devilish reasoning. She was half dead already; it would be no such great matter if she were dead outright. If she were to regain consciousness, even for a time, she might suffer great agony; why not then . . . Take it she was dying—that was the belief of all who saw her. Dillwyn had thought so. It was strange how he clung to Dillwyn's opinion above all others; as though, perhaps, he feared him, or might dread his words—afterwards. Dillwyn had thought her life uncertain. Now to make that uncertainty a certainty. That young fool would be pleased; it would flatter his vanity. It would close his mouth—he would say nothing defamatory of him to *her*. Yet it was Dillwyn, too, who had said she *might* recover! Well, what of that!

He rose. The day was now at an end, and he lit a night-lamp with a careful hand—a hand that never trembled, and then he went again, and stared down at her. How hateful the face was, with the dull, sullen light of the little lamp throwing shadows on it. If she

woke again to life there would be no longer life for him. Hell had been his life for a long time now, and hell it would remain with her return to life. It was to be either he or she.

The broad coarse face was lying helpless, looking up at him as it were, showing ghastly in the dim light. The nose was so fleshy—the fat lips half open . . . He had had no actual design in his mind until his eyes rested on those ugly lips, but then all at once the means to the end became quite clear. His mind grew bright as day. He saw it all! It would not take long and it was sure—and safe. And *she*—Agatha—would never know—no one would know. . . . And besides, this woman here—she *might* be dying. He clung to that belief in some strange way, as one clings to one's salvation. Yet how would it help him there?

He laid his fingers across his eyes—calmly, deliberately. He wanted to arrange the details. Details are always interesting. Presently he opened his eyes, still with the fingers crossed over them, and saw—blood! For a second it startled him; but then he knew what it was. The light of the lamp shining through his fingers made blood everywhere. He opened his fingers in an idle inconsequent way, and the blood fled. He closed them, and again that curious glow dazzled him. By his own will he could make the blood show or disappear! He toyed with this thought, opening and closing his fingers and finding pleasure in the foolish game at this moment when tragedy was making cold the air. Presently he knew that he was holding his fingers still, and that he was staring in a fascinated manner at the blood-red streaks between them.

Blood! Her blood! He would have it. He would be free, at all risks. A wild exultation caught him. He would kill her. There should be no more delay. His chance was here to be seized, or cast aside for ever. He felt no qualms, no fears; only a fierce delight—a very glorying in the deed—a mad anxiety to begin.

He went swiftly but noiselessly to a chest of drawers at the farther end of the room, and drew out the top shelf—always with a marvellous noiselessness. This drawer that usually—even in the broad daylight—creaked loudly when opened, now beneath the velvet fingers gave no sound whatever. He stooped forwards, peering into the drawer, moving a thing here and there, and finally brought out something—a soft linen substance—a handkerchief apparently, and moved with it to the basin-stand near him.

A squalid basin-stand of common deal. Certainly the poor, deserted creature now lying prone upon the bed, utterly at his mercy, had not cost him much—had at least one virtue, that of prudence. Of course, if she had cost him more, if she had brought him by her extravagance to his last penny, she would have been of some importance in his eyes; he might even have learned to see something in her, in spite of her huge defects; but she had done nothing beyond being ugly—(*that*, it must be allowed, she had done quite handsomely)—and stupid, and vulgar, and all the rest of it.

He raised the water jug. It made a little sound and he looked behind him. No—no one had heard. That no one could see he was sure. Who was there in the room save he—and—and that unsightly object on the bed? He looked sharply, however, round the room,

peering here and there, as people will who *feel* a presence yet cannot see it; but he saw nothing!

He abandoned his first thought of pouring water into the basin, and put back the jug very slowly into its original place. How foolish that first thought was!

With another half-unconscious glance round him he lowered the handkerchief into the jug—slowly, delicately—until the water surrounded his hand and it. How cool the water was—how refreshing! He would have a bath presently—*afterwards*. Cold water was the best of all pick-me-ups.

He lifted the handkerchief, cautiously, yet a little drip fell from it. One—two—three. They sounded like a knell from hell! They terrified him—for the moment.

He glanced suddenly over his shoulder once again to the bed where that silent form lay. Had she heard? Had she known? He thought he saw a movement of the curtains, but a second later he dismissed the fancy with a deep indrawn breath. She—that stolid thing—she could not move anything—she (with a sudden terrible determination) would never move anything again—she should die!

He was in that state of mind now that even if she *had* known—if she had been capable of rising and denouncing him—he would still have caught her by the throat and pressed her back upon her pillows and deliberately strangled the life out of her. It was decided. Fate had sent her so far upon her road, but now her travelling was over and the end of her was to be bitter and ignominious and unknown.

The handkerchief was saturated. He went towards

the bed and bent down. The terrible open mouth, with the hideousness of it, seemed to give him a demoniac courage. He folded the cloth and laid it softly over it and the faintly breathing nostrils. He pressed the damp covering down—down—moulding it to the nose and mouth as one might who was taking a cast of someone dead and unknown to them, and with quite as strong a calm and carefulness.

A moment—a frightful moment—and then she stirred, the big head swayed from side to side. Darkham—white, rigid—watched her as she moved in her terrible impotence, but still held the cloth. It was but a momentary struggle after all; suddenly it ceased. She lay now, rigid, white!—the cloth still upon her face;—her eyes had opened in the dying struggle and looked up at him, pale, horrible. But her breath—her breath was gone. She was dead.

He stood for a long time watching her. At least it seemed a long time. He had released his hold of the death-cloth, but it still lay on her face, covering the lips and nose, and leaving only those frightfully glaring eyes to be seen. They were wide open, and seemed fixed on him. He turned a little, but they seemed to follow him. A strange fancy took him and he laughed aloud. Would they follow him for ever? He laid his hand upon her lids and with a brutal haste forced back the lids upon the dying eyes.

His own laughter had frightened him, however. He drew in his breath sharply, and leaning against one of the four posts, compelled himself to listen—to watch.

Not a sound in the house. And not a sound here either! The breathing had ceased—was still. All was

over. Those men had been right then. There was so little life left in her that recovery was impossible. If he had only waited, nature would have done its own work unaided. Yet, somehow, he did not repent. He felt no remorse, no regret. He had killed her. *Killed her!* Well then? How often he had desired to kill her! And now he was free. The world was before him. He could rise—vanquish all enemies. Even love— . . . love might yet be his.

Once again that mad rush of exultation ran within his veins. Once again he sat in the room with Agatha Nesbitt—saw her, listened to her charming voice. He stooped over the woman on the bed and in a wild ecstasy tore the murderous cloth from off her face. A smothered yell of triumph broke from him. She was dead—dead—dead!

CHAPTER XIII.

Unnatural deeds

Do breed unnatural troubles.

It was over! Done! He was free! He reeled against the bedpost and tried to collect himself—to check the terrible laughter that rose to his lips. He was free at last from that thing on the bed—that thing who had been wife to him for twenty years and more.

His curious excitement came to an end at last, and he roused himself. He looked at the clock and found that it was quite an hour since—since that. He turned his eyes then on his wife's face and saw it was quite calm. There was nothing to wonder at; no sign of a struggle. There had been very little struggle indeed—life was so low within her. He assured himself that she looked natural enough, and touched the bedclothes here and there. Then he rang the bell violently, thrusting the wet handkerchief into the inside pocket of his coat as he did so; and presently the nurses came to the door, stepping softly, delicately, yet with fear on their faces. To them he told the sad news. He feared he had been a little drowsy, and she—his voice broke—must have passed away in her sleep. His manner was perfect, and they were all impressed by it, especially the nurse whom he had dismissed some hours ago, telling her he would sit up with the patient. She said

afterwards that he looked heart-broken, but so calm—the calmness of despair, no doubt.

They went with him to the bed, and bent over the silent form. There was no breath coming now from the parted lips; the features looked rigid. The face was placid, stern, with that Sphinx-like expression on it that the dead so often wear—as though they could tell one so much if they only would—as if, whilst the last breath was rushing forth, some wonders from the world beyond were caught and known by the earthly body before the soul had for ever deserted it.

Darkham himself lifted the arms—oh, so tenderly!—and crossed them on her breast. Tears rose to the nurses' eyes. How he had loved her!—and yet, how ugly she was, poor woman.

“Go!” he said to them, in a broken voice. “I shall watch here.”

They heard him lock the door after them, and felt sad with pity at the thought of the lonely vigil the broken-hearted husband was about to keep in that dim death-chamber.

He listened intently to the sound of their departing footsteps, then cautiously opened a second door that led into an adjoining room. It was a sort of dressing-room, that had been used by his wife as a place for lumber of all sorts. It was untidy, but it was large, and sitting at the far end of it one might feel far away from the bedroom outside. He struck a match with a cautious hand—a hand that it gave him a sensation of admiration to see did not tremble, and lit a candle. This he placed on the floor behind a brass-bound trunk

of gigantic size that effectually hid its rays from anyone who might be outside the windows to-night.

He sat down, prepared to watch for the dawn. It came early now, thank—— He stopped short. Well, it came early, anyway. He seated himself on a box, and began to arrange his plans. There was nothing to condemn him anywhere. She had been so far gone already that the slight stoppage of her breath that he had occasioned had made no effect upon her. Her face was quite calm and placid; and he could quote the words of Bland and Dillwyn at any moment. Besides, why should he be suspected? Who was there to suspect him?

As for himself—his manner—he could rely upon that. He held up his hand before him, and noticed boastingly that it was firm, and strong, and steady. After all, what had he done? Merely hastened the departure of a life—not taken it. Why, if he had taken it years ago, who could blame him? That devil, thwarting his every movement, destroying his life, killing him soul and body—of what use was she to the world? A mere clod, swelling the list of those who dam the flow of the tide that leads to all light and progress. Why, it was a righteous deed.

His head was resting against a wardrobe. His eyes closed. His thoughts were brilliant to-night; they flew here and there. The candle was burning dimly, and before he knew it he had lost consciousness—he was asleep.

He slept, and dreamt he was in hell! He struggled madly, and the struggle with an overwhelming mass of fiends, who were dragging him towards a cauldron full

of pitch, roused him. The madness, indeed, lasted only a few minutes, and left him wide awake. He woke with a violent start, and looked hurriedly around him. All was still.

He sat up. A sensation of damp upon his chest troubled him. He thrust his hand into his inner pocket, and drew out—the handkerchief!

With a curse he flung it from him—far as he could throw it—gazing at it with wide fascinated eyes. For the moment he was afraid of it; then sense returned to him, and all his old strength, and he was himself again. He picked up the handkerchief deliberately, and placed it once more in his pocket. A grim smile at his own folly lit his dark features.

Even as he so sat, smiling at his past weakness, a strange sound smote upon his ears. It was the sound as of some heavy body falling on the ground. Seemingly it came from the next room—from the room where the dead body lay. He rose and went quietly to the door of it, and stood there listening. And as he listened a low crooning smote upon his ear. How well he knew it.

The boy! How had *he* come there, with all the doors locked? He now went quickly forward, through the door and into the room beyond. There he stood still, as if frozen into stone. An awful sight awaited him!

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The bed! The bed he had left so decorously arranged was now in frightful disorder. The clothes were flung here and there—and on the floor, half out of the bed and half in it lay—his wife; the woman he had

left in the repose of death, as he believed, only an hour ago.

Her arms were flung out, and her head was lying on one arm, the scanty grey locks parted, and showing bald patches in this place and that. The face was almost hidden, but he could see the nose, and a little blood coming from it. Great Heaven! What a sickening sight.

As he stood gazing at it, a movement on his right attracted him. Something was on the floor, and was crawling towards the corpse. It came from behind the curtains—a squat unwieldy form, with working mouth, and eyes on fire. He knew it. It was his—son!

The poor creature drew closer and closer by degrees to the form upon the floor, as if frightened—and not understanding. When had he ever before seen his mother like this? But as he came up to her he touched her—and getting no response he touched her again—and again—and finally as if some light had dawned upon his darkened mind, he caught her and lifted her head upon his knees and began to lavish on her a whole world of endearments. Standing behind the bed-curtains as he had stood for hours, in a dull, faithful determination to be near her, he had seen her fall out of bed, and then surprise and horror had produced that crooning noise that Darkham had heard. He now bent his face to hers, and with uncouth gestures tried to wipe away the blood that was already congealing round the nostrils.

Darkham looked on.

Had the idiot touched her? Had he been the cause of her fall out of bed? No; there was no sign of a

struggle with anyone; the state of the bedclothes showed that. The struggle had been with herself alone. A last one. She had probably come to life again for some brief moments, and fought and gasped for breath, and then by a last mighty effort had flung herself on the side of the bed.

With so much strength she—*she must have recovered*, had he not hastened her death with that wet rag. He faced that thought with the strong callousness he had shown all through. Yet, as he so thought, he could feel that wet rag growing colder and colder over his heart—freezing him.

But the boy! Ah, he remembered now! That sound he had heard and made so light of when he was sitting over there arranging her death!—the death of his mother! He had come in then and secreted himself among the curtains, and had seen all. He looked upon the wretched object crouched upon the floor and advanced towards him. Taking him by the shoulder he shook him sharply. The boy looked up with vacant eyes, and Darkham motioned him imperiously to move aside. Indeed the latter now told himself that there was no time to be lost. At any moment some one might come to the door, and though it was locked, still to refuse admission—

Edwy, trained to fear him, rose sullenly, and once more retreated into the shadow of the curtains with slow dragging steps, that spoke of a long, long day of exhaustion and misery, and squatting down upon the ground sat gibbering, his eyes always on the corpse.

Darkham stooping lifted his wife. With some fear he gazed upon her. But she was now dead indeed.

He laid her back upon the bed and felt her heart. It was still. Already she was growing cold. Once again he closed the dreadful eyes, sponged the slight bloodstains from her face, and rearranged the bedclothes. Again he folded the arms across her breast in the exact position in which they had been when the nurses saw her last. The minutest detail he thought of and followed out.

The slight distortion of the features now visible would not be noticed, or treated seriously. And an hour or two besides would probably do away with it. An hour after death makes the dead face so different, even when death has been hard.

It was all finished now, and the boy only remained to be got rid of; he could not stay here.

Much as Darkham disliked being left alone in this terrible room, still he disliked more the companionship of this loathsome idiot. There was always the thought, too, that he *knew*—had *seen*. For the first time he felt thankful that his only child had been born deaf and dumb, and a fool. If only he had been born blind as well!

He unlocked the door softly, and motioned to his son to go. The idiot shook his head. He understood what his father meant, but, though accustomed to obey him, he now felt as if to leave the room that held his mother—a mother so strange, so changed, but still his mother—was impossible to him. She might wake and want him.

Darkham imperiously, by a second gesture, ordered him to leave the room, and, seeing he did not move, went towards him.

As he advanced the idiot rose. A low howl broke from him. Suddenly, as if with a mad desire for vengeance, he flung himself upon his father and tore and wrestled with him savagely. It was the anger of an enraged brute; the boy's nails seemed to tear into Darkham's flesh.

The struggle, however, lasted only for a minute or two. With a mighty effort Darkham wrenched himself free, and the idiot, his hands working convulsively dashed from the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

"If any man think it a small matter or of mean concernment to bridle his tongue, he is much mistaken; for it is a point to be silent when occasion requires, and better than to speak, though never so well."

PLUTARCH.

"ISN'T it frightful!" said old Miss Firs-Robinson, exclaiming as much with her hand as with her tongue. "Such a death!"

"A terrible death, indeed," returned Mrs. Poynter—a pretty, fashionable-looking young woman—with deep commiseration. "So sudden!"

It was the next day, and the news of Mrs. Darkham's death had spread and was now known far and wide. All the people in Rickton had "a day," and this one belonged to Miss Firs-Robinson. A most blessed thing, as everyone wanted to meet everyone else and discuss with them the tragedy. It was the Rector's wife who had been the first to use the word tragedy, and it had caught on at once. "She is so clever, you know. Always the right word on every occasion. Really quite talented! The Rector could never get on without her; she has been the making of him. That last sermon of his about regeneration, surely—*well*. And she does write, you know, for some of the papers. At all events, she has been known to answer a charade most successfully. You *must* remember. It began with 'My first was an ass.'"

Lord Ambert and Elfrida were playing tennis in the courts below against Captain Poynter and a rather pretty girl who was staying with the Poynters. It was quite a small game. They made it specially private by not calling out the scores as usual, and whispering their little jokes, all of which was a compliment to the late death in the parish. It would, of course, be terrible to give a regular tennis party on an occasion like this—but a little game—

Mr. Blount was standing on the terrace close to the nearest point from which the tennis court could be seen. He was supposed to be making himself agreeable to the companion Fate had accorded him for the moment, but in reality he was watching Elfrida with a sad but absorbed gaze. Agatha Nesbitt, sitting at the end of the terrace, seemed to read his thoughts, and beckoned him to come to her. She herself was sitting where whoever came to the hall door could be readily seen.

“And I hear,” said Mrs. Poynter, arching her brows and putting on a look of perfect misery, “that Dr. Darkham is absolutely *désolé*.”

“Oh, my dear, do you think so? Well, I don’t know, I’m sure.” Miss Firs-Robinson as she spoke turned purple. “He is—well, you know, I don’t like him. But dissolute—one should be charitable, my dear. I confess I have thought him a little queer at times in his ways, but nothing so far gone as that. No, no.”

“You mistake me,” said Mrs. Poynter, flushing delicately, yet with a glance round her. She wanted to laugh, but it is so impossible to laugh alone. She

caught Dicky Browne's eye at this moment, however, and was happy.

"I'm sure I do, my dear," said old Miss First-Robinson, heartily, who was really a good soul. "Poor man. I'm talking of Dr. Darkham, Dicky; he's gone all to pieces, they tell me, over this business."

"I hope sincerely nobody will put him together again," returned Mr. Browne, piously.

"Such a feeling man," said Mrs. Greatorex, dropping into a chair near them. "No wonder he is in such a terrible state. I fear this sad occurrence will place the neighbourhood in grief for some time."

"I suppose so. And yet"—Mrs. Poynter turned to her next neighbour—"you see, she was such a stranger to us, poor woman! *Such* a stranger!" She lifted her pale grey gloves here, and did something to her veil. "Did *you*," said she gently, looking at Mrs. Greatorex, "see much of her?"

Mrs. Poynter's voice was wonderful. It was a perfect coo, like a dove's. And she was very good-natured too in her own way, but it *had* to be her own way. She detested anything unpleasant, anything that interfered with her, anything that rubbed her up the wrong way, and she certainly detested Dr. Darkham. But she had a little way with her that precluded the idea of her detesting anybody.

"Oh, yes, very, very often," said Mrs. Greatorex, sweetly. "I always tried to do what I could for her, poor creature!"

Mrs. Greatorex always posed as the grand-daughter of an earl. And of course earl's grand-daughters have responsibilities—such as the being kind to inferiors for

example. Mrs. Greatorrex, when she went to a bazaar (which was seldom, as bazaars were expensive), always made a point of being hail-fellow well met with the sisters and wives of the tradespeople of Rickton who held stalls—for *the time being!* It looked so well—and there were precedents, very distinguished ones, for such conduct!

“And you?” said Mrs. Poynter, turning to Miss Firs-Robinson, who was looking grim. The old lady had been studying Mrs. Greatorrex. “Did you see much of her?”

“Well, as little as I could help,” said the spinster, with all the candour that adorned her, and a trifle of anger besides. “Because a more odious, a more unpleasant person I never met in my life.”

“Oh! dear Miss Firs-Robinson,” cried the Rector’s wife, a little sallow woman. “You should remember, you should indeed. She is dead, you know.”

“Yes, I do know,” said the old lady, in a loud voice. “But how does that alter matters? If the dead want to be praised they ought to behave themselves properly whilst they are alive, and *she* didn’t. I am sorry the poor woman died like that—without returning to consciousness even for a little while.”

“It was quite hopeless from the very first,” said Mrs. Poynter. “Dr. Bland and Dr. Dillwyn were both quite agreed about that.”

“Oh, no.” Agatha spoke as if involuntarily. “Not quite agreed. Dr. Dillwyn told me she might recover.”

“Told you?” questioned Mrs. Greatorrex, quite gently; then with a little smile, “But when, dear Agatha?”

The girl looked at her and paused. She seemed to struggle with a certain confusion.

Mrs. Greatorex, who would have made a splendid diplomatist, at once regretted her question and stepped into the breach. She had made up her mind that her niece was to settle herself in life well, and to have her even "mentioned" with so deplorable a detrimental as Dillwyn—a young doctor just making his first breach through the wall of life—would be destruction. She, therefore, came to Agatha's rescue, and accepted the question as answered.

"He seems to have had two minds on the subject," she said, slightly, "which only shows how ridiculous it would be to place any confidence in his opinion. Young men of his age are not to be relied upon."

"I wonder if the party at Ambert Towers will be put off?" said the rector's wife, lowering her voice and speaking confidentially. "It was to be on Thursday next!"

"I should think not. Lord Ambert is not the sort of man to——"

"No, he is not, indeed."

"He seems to me more reserved than unsympathetic," said Mrs. Greatorex, who always supported him on principle. Were they not of the same class? "Are you going?" asked she, addressing Mrs. Poynter.

"We've been asked," said that pretty woman, with downcast lids. "But do you think one should go . . . with this death so very recent? Are—" she paused prettily—"are *you* going?"

"Not as to a party," with much *empressement*. "It will, I feel sure, be a quiet affair, on account of poor Dr. Darkham's bereavement."

"Oh, bereavement!" Mrs. Poynter permitted herself first a smile, and then gave way to a subdued laugh. "I say, mustn't he be glad?" said she.

"My dear Mrs. Poynter, hush! If anyone should hear you. And really you take quite a wrong view of it. You are worse than Mr. Browne, who says quite dreadful things. I admire Dr. Darkham, you know, I do indeed. I think him an ideal man. Fancy his devotion to that dreadful being all these years." She lifted her hands. "Such a handsome man, my dear Mrs. Poynter; he is one in a thousand."

"So glad," said Mrs. Poynter, rather frivolously. "Two of him in a thousand would be more than one could endure. To me he always seems—don't you know—well, so out of it."

"Out of it?"

"Well, not *in* it, don't you know? A—a little on one side—eh? A little—well—vulgar is a horrid word, isn't it? Oh, how d'ye do, Lord Ambert?—been winning as usual?"

"Not as usual. I've been winning to-day because Miss Firs-Robinson has been my partner!"

"Oh, I like that," said Elfrida, who was with him. "As if I was the least use to you. You could have won the game quite as well without me. Better I daresay. I don't believe I made five good strokes all day. My ball went *into* the net, instead of over it, every time."

"Yet you seem to play so well," says Mrs. Poynter.

"Ah, that's just it! That's what takes people in. Now and again I place quite a wonderful ball and then everyone makes up their mind about me. But it doesn't

last. I'm a perfect fraud!" She looked up at Blount suddenly, brilliantly, intentionally. "Now am I not, Mr. Blount?"

Blount hesitated and coloured, and Lord Ambert stared at him superciliously. Blount shook his head.

"You must let me contradict you," said he shyly, boyishly.

Elfrida laughed. "What a rudeness!" said she. "But one's pastor and master has of course privileges; that's the worst of him. Fancy contradicting me!"

"Shall I get you some tea?" asked Ambert, who was frowning.

"No, thank you. There is claret cup somewhere, if one could only find it. Mr. Blount, will you come with me on a voyage of discovery?"

Poor Blount. His eyes lit up. He went quickly to her, and she led him a fool's dance for the next ten minutes.

Ambert strolled leisurely away in an opposite direction, his face set and angry.

"What a pity it is that she *will* encourage that poor boy," said Mrs. Poynter to Agatha. "And when her mind is so entirely made up to marry Lord Ambert."

"Oh, perhaps not," said Agatha, anxiously. "I hope not."

"Hope won't help you there. Anyone can see how it is. But it seems unfair to use that nice Mr. Blount as a means of tightening her hold on Ambert."

"It isn't that," said Agatha. "You do her injustice there. She could marry Lord Ambert at any moment, I am certain. It is she who holds back, and I still hope she will not accept him."

"Then you think——"

"I am afraid she is a terrible flirt," said Agatha. Whereon they both laughed.

"Here comes John Dillwyn," said Mrs. Poynter, presently. "And straight to us. *You* are not a flirt, I know, Agatha—which makes me all the more afraid for you. You know he hasn't a penny. Well, John," taking a sympathetic note at once, "so that poor woman has slipped through your fingers. We are all so shocked about it."

"It was dreadfully sudden," said Dillwyn, gravely, taking Agatha's hand and holding it a moment. "Yes, she is dead, poor soul."

"There was no hope from the beginning, I suppose?" said Mrs. Poynter.

"I don't think that. I fully believed there was a chance for her, but it was a bare one. Still——"—he knitted his brows, as if perplexed—"I believed in it."

"You mustn't say that now, John," said Mrs. Poynter, patting her cousin's arm; "you have your fortune to make, you know, and mistakes are fatal."

"Yes—my fortune!" The young man smiled and his eyes wandered again to Agatha, who looked back at him bravely. "And yet I cannot change my opinion. Bland was half-hearted about the case; I don't think he even really believed in a rally, though he said so; but I did. However I was wrong as you see."

"Ah, you'll get on, John; you have the courage to confess your faults," said his cousin, smiling; "but don't confess them before unappreciative people. Dr. Darkham is, of course, very——"

"I saw him only for a moment this morning. He looked like death himself. I had no idea he—er—cared for her so much. His face looked quite changed."

"What a blessing!" said Mrs. Poynter, with a laugh she suppressed at its birth. "Well, and——"

"Agatha, I think we must go now," said a cold voice. Mrs. Greatorrex laid her hand on Agatha's shoulder. "How d'ye do, Dr. Dillwyn? I hope you have seen poor Dr. Darkham, and that he is bearing up?"

"He seems greatly cut up," said Dillwyn.

"Ah, as I said. So sympathetic, so tender-hearted! I should so like to tell him how I feel for him."

"I am afraid you will have no chance of doing that except by letter. He is leaving home directly after the funeral for some months."

"So wise of him; he must want a real change."

"After a while he will realise his freedom," said Mrs. Poynter. "I am sure he must have been wretched with that awf——, that poor woman."

"And are you to look after his patients?" asked Mrs. Greatorrex, turning to Dillwyn.

"Oh, no," smiling. "I am not big enough for that. Bland is to see to them."

"Ah!" Mrs. Greatorrex smiled beautifully. "Your class of patients and his are *so* different. But you will rise, dear Dr. Dillwyn. I am sure you will rise." She bowed sweetly and laid her hand within Agatha's arm. "Come, dearest, it is time we said good-bye to dear Miss Firs-Robinson."

Once settled in the fly, that on all occasions was borrowed from the inn to convey them to such distances

as Mrs. Greatorrex could not walk, the latter turned to her niece.

"When did Dr. Dillwyn tell you Mrs. Darkham might recover?" asked she, very quietly.

"Last evening. I was standing at the gate and he happened to be passing by. I asked him about Mrs. Darkham's condition, and he told me he thought she *might* recover, but it was very doubtful."

"Very doubtful indeed, as has been proved. Rather an unfortunate remark for him. By the bye, Agatha," drily, "I think it would be as well for you not to go down to the gate so late in the evening for the future."

"It wasn't late, Aunt Hilda."

"Late enough. You know how susceptible you are of cold."

"Cold! I never catch cold."

"Then you may catch something else. The attention of the public. Avoid that, my dear, at all risks."

"I don't understand you," said the girl, proudly.

"I think you do. Never run after a young man, Agatha—especially when he is so poor that he *cannot* marry you."

Agatha turned to her, her face as white as death—she would have spoken, but Mrs. Greatorrex put up a warning hand. "No, not a word, my dear. Words on occasions such as these are mere folly. Let us talk of something else. Poor Dr. Darkham for example. Rather shameful Lord Ambert's having his party next Thursday, I think; but I suppose we had better go. No use fighting with him. But don't look *too* happy, Agatha. And don't play tennis! I thought it so deplorably wanting in taste that girl's playing with Lord Ambert

to-day—and the others playing with them. Such bad form—such a want of sympathy. But that girl would do anything to secure Ambert. I wonder he doesn't see through her. I fear Dr. Darkham will be much offended when he hears of the tennis. I'm so glad *you* didn't play."

"Of course I shouldn't have played—but Elfrida is different. She hardly knew Mrs. Darkham—and she is very young."

"She is quite your own age."

"But she looks so much younger."

"I should think," said Mrs. Greatorrex presently, "between you and me, that Dr. Darkham is feeling profoundly relieved at this present moment."

"You mean—?"

"That that woman was the curse of his existence for the past twenty years."

"She was dreadful, certainly. But Dr.—Dr. Dillwyn said he looked so sorry."

"It was a shock of course, but he will recover from that in no time. And he is a handsome man, and rich and clever."

"Very clever, I should think."

"Do you—*do* you?" said Mrs. Greatorrex eagerly. She cast a quick eager glance at her young cousin. "Well, he is free now, you know—a widower is half a bachelor."

"Yes." Agatha looked at her as if wondering. There had been some meaning in her tone that the girl felt but did not understand.

"Yes. Don't you see? There is a chance for you now," said Mrs. Greatorrex, playfully, but with deadly meaning.

The girl, after a swift glance at her, turned away. She felt cold and sick. "Was this woman human, to pretend—to jest so—on the very threshold of Death? And was it all jesting? She drew a long breath as if suffocating.

"How can you talk like that?" she said.

CHAPTER XV.

"Even such a time that takes on trust
Our youth, our joys, our all we have."

"NOTHING is more pleasant to the eye," said Lord Bacon, "than green grass nicely shorn." And truly his quaint lordship would have been pleased had he been able to look upon Mrs. Poynter's grass to-day. It was shorn and shaven as close as the priest of old who was so unkind as to marry the pretty maid forlorn to that dreadfully tattered old man we have all known in our story books. Not a daisy to be seen—not one blade of grass higher than another. Even close to the edges of the beds the sward was cut as tightly as possible, as if to lay bare to all beholders the late beauties of the autumn plants. For summer was gone to sleep, and lay prone upon the earth covered with her dead rose leaves—only to wake again hereafter.

And now autumn reigned, and very wisely, too—and gloriously. For if one must sleep another must wake, to watch and guard. The dahlias in the long borders were shining like coloured stars, and the asters and sunflowers still upheld their heads. In the smaller

beds the good begonias, who never crave for rest until dread frost compels them, shed great splendour where they lay. But they are frail things and drop from their stems in a night when harsh winds assail them.

June, July, August, all have gone. And with them every thought of the poor unpleasant woman who had been done to death so strangely, only three months ago! One never talked of Mrs. Darkham now, though everyone was very interested in, and said a good deal about Dr. Darkham, who had come back three weeks ago from that sad trip he had taken to shake off his grief.

His grief appeared excellently well shaken off, they all said. He seemed quite to ignore it indeed when he returned, looking pale and thin certainly, but more interested in social surroundings. He was more full of life than he had ever been before. There were some, however, who translated his liveliness into positive excitement—they said his grief had affected his head—all these were spinsters of thirty-five or so—mostly “or so”—and their motive was obvious—they wished to console him. Nobody listened to them.

Mr. Sparks, a young man staying with the Poynters, who during the last year had contracted an unfortunate passion for photographing his friends, was now standing out on the lawn, with his instrument of torture before him, and his head buried in a dirty velveteen cloth. Goodness knows what he was doing under it. Perhaps *he* did. He was a nervous young man, of kindly disposition it must be confessed, but it is beyond doubt that he did the most frightful things with that photographic arrangement of his. He “meant well,” as they

say, but he never did it. He was abnormally tall and thin, and his hair fell over his forehead; the atrocities that he had committed no doubt preyed upon his conscience. To add to his other misfortunes, he was a friend of Dicky Browne, who to-day was taking great joy out of him.

"We'll be taken in a group," decided Mr. Browne, after a long discussion; "we can be taken separately afterwards, if we have the courage." He looked at Mrs. Poynter, who had been most eager to get a sitting all to herself. She was pretty, and she knew it, and why shouldn't others know it? She was unaware of Mr. Sparks' peculiar talent, certainly; or perhaps she would not have been so desirous of seeing herself or her children—two lovely, little beings of six and eight—once again on paper.

"Now, I'm ready, if you are!" roared Mr. Sparks from the centre of the lawn.

"One minute," shouted back Dicky Browne. He was settling everybody, and pulling out their skirts. This made all the women mad. What man on earth could pull out a woman's skirt properly? Mrs. Poynter pushed him away, and Elfrida said he must be a fool to think one's frock could stick out like *that*. Even Agatha, who was looking *distracte* and nervous—Dr. Darkham was bending over her—gave him an unkind word.

And, besides, there were so many other troubles. So many people wanted to be taken close to somebody else that poor Dicky had quite a time of it. Elfrida, indeed, was especially troublesome. Lord Ambert was leaning over the back of her chair, and surely, as Mr.

Browne complained afterwards, in a thing like that, one string to one's bow was as much as any amateur photographer could permit, but at the very last moment she had beckoned to Blount, and a second later he was at her feet, his tennis racket lying negligently across his knees, but his eyes on hers.

Confound it! The eyes would never do. Mr. Browne, full of a sense of responsibility, gave him a silent kick somewhere, that brought him, well—not him—but his eyes to the ground.

"Are you ready?" roared out Sparks again, who was suffocating from his incessant visits beneath the velveteen cloth. It was a very warm day.

"One moment." Dr. Dillwyn had just come in, and where was he to be placed? He made straight for Agatha, and Dicky could not fail to see the significance of the smile with which she greeted him. Indeed Dicky, who had been flitting between this and town during the past three months, had gathered a fund of knowledge about the entire neighbourhood.

Dr. Darkham was still bending over Agatha. Dillwyn came up deliberately, and took the hand she held out to him, and whispered something to her, at which she smiled.

"Is there room for me here?" That was his whisper.

"Yes, yes," she said softly, gently. So he laid his hand on the arm of her chair, and stood erect.

"Dr. Dillwyn," said Mrs. Greatorex, sweetly and clearly. "You look out of place there. The position does not suit you. Come here, beside Miss Deeming and me; there is plenty of room."

"My dear Mrs. Greator, not a movement, I entreat," cried Mr. Browne, with uplifted hands, who had read Agatha's eyes, and at once knew all about it. "Poor dear Sparks is at the last gasp. We can't change again. Now, Dillwyn, be firm—be *firm*, I beg of you." Was there meaning in his mischievous glance? "The slightest giving way is fatal in affairs of this kind. You have been running, I see. Cling on to Miss Nesbitt's chair, and regard yourself as a rock."

"Is it now?" shrieked Sparks, who was at his last stage of nervousness.

"Just a moment for myself. There now—go on—we're transfixed," yelled Dicky back.

There was a moment of awful tension. Everyone was putting on their worst smile and their most fatally imbecile expression, and Mr. Sparks was about to withdraw the cap, when a lively crash was heard and a smothered shriek.

They all sprang to their feet, and the *tableau* was spoiled. With consternation they looked behind them, with a lively sympathy indeed, sympathy, however, that died on the spot and gave way to extreme indignation. Really, they might have known it. It was Dicky, of course. As usual, he had chosen the frailest seat in the place as a support for his rather stout frame—this time a milking stool of delicate proportions—and one of the legs had come off, and now Dicky and it were floundering together on the floor of the verandah, buried in one common ruin.

"Oh! I say!" screamed Sparks, and sat down in the grass beyond, and gave it all up. And it would

have been such a splendid picture too! But no, he *wouldn't cry*; he was determined on *that*.

Mr. Browne had now disentangled himself from "that beastly stool" and was himself again. He marshalled them all back to their original positions, and called out to poor Sparks something that sounded like "Buck-up." Sparks accordingly did so, and the play once more commenced.

"But for goodness sake, Dicky, don't sit on any more three-legged stools," said Elfrida plaintively.

"Not me," said Dicky. "Any lady like me to sit on her lap?" But no lady did, apparently, so he was obliged to fall back on an ordinary drawing-room chair.

"Are you ready?" called out Sparks, who was now a little hoarse.

"As a trivet," returned Mr. Browne, whom nothing affected; "but a last word, Sparks. If you don't make us all look beautiful, there'll be a row on here."

Mr. Sparks made no reply. He had once more disappeared beneath the pall; then he came out again, whisked off the round cap in front, and waved his hat. All was over.

Mr. Browne, who had constituted himself boss of the entertainment, instantly declared his indignation.

"What! Done already! Very little show for our money, I must say! Do you think we threw ourselves into advanced society attitudes to be admired by each other for only one second? Where's your conscience, Sparks?"

But Sparks only grinned; he knew Dicky, and he had no time to talk, being filled with anxiety about his negative.

The party in the verandah broke up and went here and there through the gardens, or else back to the tennis courts. Tea was going on in a large tent on the lawn, and presently Elfrida, who had seated herself in a garden chair outside the tent, and had sent Lord Ambert for some coffee, saw Mr. Blount standing near her. He had escorted Mrs. Greatorrex to the door of the tent, had given her her tea, and then beat a hasty retreat. Elfrida looked up at him. She was alone—quite; a singular occurrence so far as she was concerned, and for the first time, therefore, she was able to look at Blount with a critical eye. It struck her first that he was the youngest looking man she had ever seen, and then, for she was fond of analysis, she told herself she regarded him like that, simply because Lord Ambert was so very far from young.

Presently Blount looked round and saw her, and such a light of gladness grew upon his face as could not be mistaken. She flushed slightly as she saw it, and then laughed. He came up to her; and as she drew her skirts aside he sat down close to her.

“Can’t I do something for you?” asked he.

“You can indeed; you can sit here beside me and amuse me, and tell me things.”

“Tell you things?” He laughed at this; he was feeling extraordinarily happy. “What can I tell you that could interest you?”

“Well, one thing,” said this finished coquette, “your Christian name. When one likes a person, one always wants to know how those who love him call him.”

She smiled at him divinely, bending her pretty head towards him. She looked very lovely in her exquisite

gown—a delicate petunia shade, clouded with lace—and the curate looking at her lost his head a little. He looked back at her, with all the passionate and very real love he felt for her showing now openly within his honest young eyes.

For a moment the coquette waited, looking at him—wondering perhaps—she seemed even fascinated. Then she drew back, and laughed again.

“You won’t tell me?” said she.

Blount woke from his mad dream, and to a most unpleasant reality. The Rev. Thomas Blount was a name that could be seen very often on cards for soirées, or placards for temperance meetings, or invitations to tea for Friendly Girls’ societies. It hurt him in some strange way that she had never noticed those cards and placards. If she had even liked him, she would have felt some such small interest in him.

“I’ll tell you of course,” said he. Yet he hesitated. *Thomas!* How could he tell her his name was Thomas? It was indeed one of his greatest griefs that he had to sign himself so when he came to this parish. Even though chagrined at her not knowing it, he felt rather relieved about it. He had always been Tom till now—at home, at school, at college. But the Bishop had rather insisted on the *Thomas!* Thomas a Becket, you know—so much in everybody’s mouth nowadays—and Thomas a Kempis and all the rest of them; Thomas was such a respectable name!

For all that, the “Thomas” grated with poor Blount. His father had had a footman once who was called Thomas, and his brothers used to tease him about it!

"Ah! I know now," cried Elfrida, as he hesitated. "It is Thomas. I saw it in a——"

"Oh, really, you know, it is *not* my name," said Blount. "I'm always called 'Tom' by my friends."

"Yes?" Elfrida turned and gave him a wonderful little look from under her hat—a charming hat all covered with violets. "Am *I* your friend?" asked she.

It was perfectly disgraceful of her. The poor boy paled a little, and then coloured violently. He was a little older than she was, but, oh! so much younger.

"My friend?" he stammered, and then stopped. Something in her face, her eyes, that were looking over her shoulder at someone approaching, checked another word. He, too, looked hastily backwards, to see Ambert coming out of the tent and approaching them, a cup in his hand and a scowl upon his brow. Mrs. Grea-torex and Miss Firs-Robinson were behind him.

There was something more than a scowl in Ambert's face; there was the look of a man who had made up his mind about something. Blount felt instinctively what that something was. He knew as well as if he had been told it that Ambert was going to ask the girl to marry him, and a paroxysm of despair seized hold on him. Someone had stopped Ambert on his way towards Elfrida, and there was a moment.

CHAPTER XVI.

They say that other eyes are bright,
I see no eyes like thine;
So full of heaven's serenest light,
Like midnight stars they shine.

HE turned to Elfrida, his face pale and miserable. He hardly knew what he was saying.

"He is coming—Ambert, I mean. He will ask you to go and see the houses with him."

"Is that all?" Elfrida looked amused.

"He is going to ask you to marry him."

"Is *that* all?" She laughed now, merrily. Her lovely little face, that was so infantile, yet so strong and so determined beneath all its youth and sweetness, seemed now slightly mocking.

"Don't go with him," entreated Blount, passionately. All in a moment the youth of his own face seemed to die from it. He looked strong and earnest. His eyes were lit with a fire she had not thought them capable of. She looked at him strangely for a while. Then she smiled.

"Why should I not?" she asked gaily. She had quite recovered herself. Ambert was very close now, and she turned and smiled at him—a smile of encouragement.

He came up and gave her the cup she had asked for, not noticing Blount even by a bare nod. He made

a point of being rude to Blount. She drank the coffee and then consented to go with him to the vineries. She rose, her small graceful figure, slender as an elf's, looking even more fragile than usual in her pale gown, and moved a step or two forwards with Ambert at her side.

Blount rose too. The very bitterness of death seemed on him now. She was going—going from him for ever.

At that moment Elfrida turned her graceful neck, and stopped and held out her hand to him. The little trifter was true to her calling.

“Won’t you come too, Mr. Blount? Do.”

There was actual entreaty in her eyes. Blount would have refused her request, but for that look. As a fact Elfrida felt the proposal from Ambert was imminent, and though she desired it, she wilfully determined to put it off, as women sometimes will. Blount rose, and regardless of Ambert’s insolent air, went with her towards the houses.

“How provoking,” cried old Miss Firs-Robinson, dropping into a seat.

“Provoking?” questioned Mrs. Greatorrex in a puzzled tone.

“Why, the way Elfrida is going on with that silly boy.”

“Dear Miss Firs-Robinson, I have noticed it,” said Mrs. Greatorrex, wilfully misunderstanding her; “most reprehensible I think, myself, when one considers the—er—well,” with sweet impertinence, “the difference in their positions.”

“Just what I am always telling her. Such a terrible difference!”

"Well—*terrible?* I shouldn't put it so strongly if I were you. Sad more than terrible. And of course these social inequalities must exist. I have often," sighing, "felt sorry for them myself when mixing with those who—well, were not exactly on my own level. But you are always so straightforward—except *now*," archly. "You surely cannot regard dear Lord Ambert as 'a silly boy?'"

"Who's talking of Ambert?" said Miss Firs-Robinson, sharply. "Boy, indeed—not much of a boy about him. He'll never see forty again, or I'm a Dutchman. Why, I'm talking of young Blount, the curate." She paused, and some words came back to her. "What do you mean by social inequalities may I ask? I can tell you what," said the stout old dame, ruffling her head in her bonnet. "That Ambert, with his empty title, is but a poor exchange for Elfrida, with her beauty and her fortune."

"I wonder, then, that you encourage the idea."

"As for that, it is as much Elfrida's idea as mine. She is very ambitious, but she's the worst flirt I ever met, too; and I say it, though I am her aunt. She is drawing that poor boy at her chariot wheels now for a pure whim, though she knows she is risking the chance of Ambert all the time."

"Are you so sure that Lord Ambert means to propose?" asked Mrs. Greator, in a low voice, fraught with immense friendly solicitude. "Men of his rank so often trifle with girls, and then ride away."

"I'm sure of one thing anyway," said Miss Firs-Robinson, grimly; "that the man who went in for trifling

with Elfrida, would come off second best. You may take my word for that."

"Ah! she looks very advanced," said Mrs. Greator, sorrowfully. "Some girls of the present day are so extraordinary—so emancipated—I believe that is the right word—that I can scarcely class them with the girls who used to be called young ladies in my time."

"I don't know much about girls," said Miss Firs-Robinson, stoutly, "but I will say for Elfrida that a better girl never stepped. There's not a soul on earth that I love like her. She's as good as gold, and a first-rate companion. My! The stories that girl tells!"—here "that girl's" aunt shook with laughter, apparently over a very recent tale—"and the way she caricatures people—you'd really swear they were in the room with you. You should see her!—you'd know yourself in a moment."

Here Mrs. Greator turned scarlet. All at once she saw herself being made fun of by Elfrida, and the audacity of the thing enraged her.

Miss Firs-Robinson laughed again; she was having a right royal revenge.

"And she's good to the poor, too; in fact, she's good to everyone—except, perhaps"—thoughtfully—"young men."

"To me," said Mrs. Greator, spitefully, "she appears the very kindest girl I ever knew to young men and indeed to old men, and *all* men. She seems to have no other thought than for them."

"Just so. I said she was a flirt; but when she's married to Ambert she'll cure of that."

"When she *is*," said Mrs. Greatorrex, with emphasis, and a peculiar smile.

Miss Firs-Robinson might have gone on again, adding more fuel to the fire, but a little rush of people out of the tent near them distracted her attention. Dicky Browne was leading, but was hard pressed by Agatha and Mrs. Poynter and a few others.

"What is it, Agatha?" asked Mrs. Greatorrex, as the girl reached her.

"Sparks!" gasped Mr. Browne. "He says he wants to take us again."

"Oh, never! Never in the world!" cried Mrs. Poynter, who thought it smart to be a little bit American now and then.

"So we're flying—flying for our lives," said Dicky. "Stop us at your peril." He looked back. "Oh, lawks; here he is," said he; whereupon they all took to their heels again and disappeared into a bit of wood close to them.

Agatha was last; she turned aside, and separating herself from the others ran lightly up a little path that led towards a tangle of ferns and young trees—mere saplings. She knew the place well, and knew it to be solitary. No one would go there to-day, and she wanted to be alone to think. Half an hour ago Dillwyn had been called away to see a poor child in the village whose little hand had been badly scalded. He had passed Agatha when going, and had told her he would be back again in an hour or less. Without him the day seemed dull, and the thought of escaping from everyone, of sitting alone in that small retreat until his return, was good to her. She wouldn't confess to herself that

the idea of her getting away from Dr. Darkham had its charm too. She clung to the other thought. She could see the road by which Jack—she had grown to think of him as Jack—would return. Indeed his shortest way would be straight through here. She told herself she was going to sit here and watch for his coming; and out of such telling no shame came to her heart. She loved him, and he loved her. And though he had not spoken she believed he was waiting for her, until his prospects were brighter, surer. She laughed to herself over that. As if she cared about his prospects. She cared for nothing on earth but him, himself—his dear, *dear* self.

She had gained her shelter now, and stood looking towards the road. Two of the young saplings were quite big boys now, and very tall for their age. They towered over *her*, at all events. They stood both together, and she stood between them, always with her beautiful face looking towards the road—and she twined her arms round these younglings, and so supported herself. All her thoughts were given to Dillwyn. So engrossed were they, indeed, that she heard no footstep behind her—knew of no approach, until the voice she hated above all others sounded on her ear.

She felt she was as pale as death as she turned to confront him.

CHAPTER XVII.

“For which I cry both day and night,
For which I let slip all delight,
Whereby I grow both deaf and blind.”

“DR. DARKHAM! *You!*” Her tone was cold, almost haughty.

“Yes. I followed you!” He looked at her, his eyes resting on her. Such strange eyes, they seemed on fire! And his tone—it was one she had never heard before. Always up to this he had been so subservient—so calm, so gentle. She had hated the calmness and the gentleness all through, hardly knowing why, but this new phase was worse—it frightened her!

As for Darkham, he stood there looking at her; gloating on her beauty—the beauty for which he had sold his soul. How sweet she was—a thing born of the gods. So tall, so slender, so defiant, so divine!

When youth and beauty meet together
There's worke for breath.

Darkham drew his sharply. All the time he had been away on that holiday he had given himself after his wife's death—he had thought of nothing but Agatha. Day and night her image stayed with him. It even overcame that other image—that ghastly, hideous thing with the white cloth lying across the nose and mouth, that sometimes sought to obtrude itself. But it was

baffled—killed—*killed again*—by the face of Agatha, that always stood out like a gleaming star in the darkness.

But in all his dreams of her, had she ever been as beautiful as now? She had still her arms round the young trees—she was, indeed, clinging to them now, as if demanding support of them, and her small, shapely head and slender figure showed through them as though they formed a living panel.

Each passing wind ruffled her lovely locks; and somehow it seemed to Darkham as if these winds made haste to overtake each other—as though to be the first to reach her—as though in love with the sweet riot they were creating.

Something other than the longing to be always with her had urged him towards this interview. The fear of losing her altogether! He had seen the way she went and had followed her, and had rightly judged that she was waiting here to see Dillwyn return. He had always dreaded the latter's influence over her, even before his wife, in her coarse way, had assured him of it. He knew, however, that Dillwyn had not yet spoken; but that he would do so *soon* there could be but little doubt. If he spoke Agatha would accept him, and once having given her word would be slow to move in any other direction. To be the first in the field then was everything. She might refuse him, but he would not take her refusal; he would go straight to Mrs. Greatorrex and lay the whole situation before her. The rest would be easy.

He knew Mrs. Greatorrex. Money was a god to her, and she would strongly urge Agatha to act as he

desired. She would condone the haste of his proposal—the indecent haste that drove him to ask another woman in marriage when his wife was only three months dead in her grave. He could explain away all that by saying he feared to lose her—by a judicious hint about Dillwyn's attentions. He knew how that would annoy her. And she was an obstinate and determined woman, who would go all lengths to gain her own ends. She would be on his side beyond doubt. He could see her to-night—a note would manage it.

All this he had thought out as he followed Agatha step by step to the place where she had told herself she would be so sure of secrecy.

"You followed me!" Her soft eyes flashed. "Why should you follow me?"

"You know," said Darkham. He advanced a step nearer to her. "You *must* know."

His voice now was shaken with passion, and his face was deadly white. He was alone with her, far from everyone, and he was going to tell her that he loved her. To him it was the moment of his life. However she answered him—*however* she took his declaration, still he would have spoken—he would have poured out before her the torrent of desire that had blasted his life for six long months, and laid it bare and arid as a sandy desert.

It was nothing to him at this moment that she would so surely refuse him. He thought only of the delight of telling her. Oh! the joy of that. Of letting loose the mad love, for the chance winning of which he had sold his hope in the world to come.

"I know nothing. I desire to know nothing." The

girl had stepped out now from between the trees, and was standing before him, quite calm, but with a little droop of the lids he was not slow to interpret. It meant disdain. But he cared for nothing now, save his one mad longing to tell her."

"You do know," said he in a strange voice. "I dare you to say otherwise. You know that I love you." It was out. It was said. The very air was ringing with it. He repeated it. To himself it seemed that he was shouting the great news, but in reality his voice was low—intense. "I love you. I have loved you always. *Always*. Even whilst that woman lived. You know that too. I have seen it in your eyes so often. No, not a word. Let me speak. . . . I have been silent so long."

"To be silent for ever would be better," said Agatha. She was very pale, but she had a certain courage of her own and it stood to her, so far, most valiantly. "You must see what folly this is. Why do you speak? What good will it do you?"

"It means life!" said Darkham. "What nights—what days, have been filled with my vain longing for such an hour as this. To *say* it—to tell you how unutterably dear you are to me, has been my consuming passion since first we met. Often—often, when attending your aunt, a craving to speak to you—to lay bare my heart—to take you in my arms—" He moved towards her and she shrank back affrightedly. After all, a girl's best courage does not amount to much!

"What!" said he, "do you think I would touch you? No, no."

There was, however, something so disagreeable, so

suggestive, about his thus openly reading her slight gesture, that the girl's heart died within her. Yet the man was in earnest. He would not have touched her.

"All I desire is, that you should hear me. I love you as I believe no man ever loved a woman before. My life is yours; take it—and all that I have—all that I *am* is yours, too. Agatha!"—the word came from him involuntarily, and as she heard it, it grated, and she started and frowned—"have mercy on me. It is yours to raise or destroy me—*destroy me!* Great heavens, girl, can't you see that?"

His face was convulsed. Perhaps some strange belief that the love of this pure woman would cleanse him from his sin and deliver him from the pains of hell animated his words. But hardly. For it is a sure thing that he would have braved the pains of hell to gain her.

"You must be mad," said she. She was trembling now. "How can you talk to me like this?—to me, who——"

"Well?" said he—his voice was a question—"well?"

"Why go into it?" said the girl, gently, touched by the horrible anguish in his face. "Is it not enough for you to——"

"To what?" violently, as she hesitated to finish her sentence. "Your words are enigmas, I would hear from your own lips the answers to them." He had lost himself now in the extremity of his despair, and his manner was stormy. Agatha threw up her head.

"You *demand* an answer?" asked she, coldly.

"An answer! Yes. You say I must be mad to talk to you. To you—who? Finish that sentence!" His

manner now was dictatorial, almost insolent. The masterful spirit of the man had broken all bounds.

"As you insist," said Agatha, calmly, "I shall finish it. To you—who," slowly, defiantly, "are *abhorrent to me!*"

She stood, looking at him very quietly, though her heart was beating wildly. How was it all to end? Would no one ever come? Involuntarily, her eyes wandered to the road again, where Dillwyn might be supposed to be by this time, but only dust met her gaze. She felt like sister Anne in the old story.

Darkham broke into a hoarse laugh.

"So you are waiting for *him!* Sitting here—waiting—waiting for your *secret* lover! A lover very slow to speak, as it appears!"

Agatha looked at him.

"Dr. Darkham!" she said very quietly, but with compressed lips, "I am sure you do not know how rude you are. I forgive you however. One has to be born to that kind of thing!"

Her calm insolence enraged him.

"You think to marry that young fool," said he. "And I tell you you never shall. I shall not allow it! Your aunt will not allow it."

"Mrs. Greatorex is not my aunt," said Agatha. "But am I to understand then that you are going to bring *her* into this hateful matter?"

"I shall certainly tell her how things are," returned he doggedly.

"You would coerce me. You would compel me to accept you," cried she miserably—a vision of Mrs. Greatorex's anger rising before her.

"I compel you in no wise! I would only have careful consideration, where your best interests are concerned. I can supply you with all that makes life bearable. I can surround you with luxuries—and Dillwyn, what can he do?"

"I don't want him to do anything," said Agatha slowly. She said nothing more for a moment, and the meaning of her words sank into Darkham's heart. No, Dillwyn need do nothing. She loved him; love was sufficient! What more was wanting? Agatha's voice broke through his wretched thoughts. "I do not understand your allusions to Dr. Dillwyn. He is merely a friend, an acquaintance of mine. No more."

"No more!" He mimicked her tone, and burst into queer laughter. "Would you swear to that? Ay! I suppose—and die for it—just because he has not said to you what I have said to-day. But you will never marry him. Mark that! You will marry me!"

"You mean that you will make Mrs. Greatorex my enemy about this," said the girl, scornfully. "You will turn her against me."

"As for that," said he, "you are not the down-trodden slave you would describe. The law of to-day," bitterly, "leaves most people very free. You are thoroughly protected."

"So far, yes; but you also know that my only home is with Mrs. Greatorex. If she were to turn against me——"

"Then I should take you in."

"Never!" said she strongly. "I would rather die on the roadside than have anything to do with you."

"You think that now, but time changes most things,

and poverty is hard to bear. You will listen to your aunt at last; and I—I who have loved you—I who have looked forward to such an hour as this—have looked to you as my salvation—”

“Dr. Darkham!” she turned upon him passionately, “do not look to me at all. It is useless, believe me. Nothing under Heaven could change my determination on this point. I have told you I would rather die than marry you. Look elsewhere and forget me, I entreat you.”

She turned away from him and glanced once more up the road. Would he *never* come?

“Not in sight yet?” said Darkham, with a contemptuous laugh. “To keep you waiting so. What a dilatory lover.”

She disdained reply to this. But she turned her eyes from the road and back again to his.

“I wish you would go away,” said she, quietly.

“That you may see him alone? A most reasonable request.” He laughed again, harshly, with forced merriment; then suddenly he fell on his knees before her, and caught hold of her gown. “Agatha, for the sake of the heaven I have lost, hear me! You *must* hear me! See—I am at your very feet! Give me a word—a word—only *one*! Just one word of hope. Oh, my soul, if you only knew how I feel towards you—what I have *done* for you! Agatha, have pity.” He seemed hardly to know what he was saying. He caught the hem of her gown and pressed it to his lips. The girl, distressed, horrified, laid her hand upon his head to press it back, away from her. To him the pressure of that soft, hasty hand seemed like a benediction.

He rose, slowly, staggering a little, and looked up

at her; she had moved away towards an opening in the hedge that led to the road, and was holding up her hand as if to attract somebody. Her face was white, terrified; even in this strange moment he felt a sensation of gladness in the thought that he could move her some way, even to fear.

In another minute Dillwyn had sprung over the stile and was beside her. He looked quickly from her to Darkham.

"I saw you," said the girl, laughing a little hurriedly. "And this was your nearest way back, you know, and——"

"And as I am due to see a patient now," said Dr. Darkham, drawing out his watch and examining it closely, "I am glad you have come in time to see Miss Nesbitt back to the grounds."

"I, too, am glad I was in time," said Dillwyn, icily.

CHAPTER XVIII.

“I do not like thee, Doctor Fell,
The reason why I cannot tell
But this, indeed, I know full well—
I do not like thee, Doctor Fell.”

“*WHY* don't you like him?”

It was the next morning, and Mrs. Greatorex, lounging on a sofa in her bedroom, was regarding Agatha with a rather stern air.

Dr. Darkham, true to the promise he had made to himself, had gone to Rickton Villa last night, had sought a private interview with her, and told her all: of his admiration for her niece, of his fear of losing her unless he spoke at once, of his belief that Dillwyn was in love with her also, and of the settlements he was prepared to make.

These last were very handsome. For the past twenty years of his successful life, he had saved far more than he had spent—refusing to go much into society or to entertain, because of his wife's deficiencies, though by his marriage with that wife he had been made a rich man. There had been no settlements on his marriage with her, and all her fortune was now within his grasp. It was with that, indeed, he intended to buy Agatha.

Mrs. Greatorex's ambitious heart rose to the bait. The sum he proposed to settle on Agatha was considerably more than she had even hoped for, and during

the past week or two she had been led by Darkham to understand that he loved her "niece," as she always called Agatha.

Darkham, watching her, half-smiled to himself,—she was so easily read, and so sordid, and so mean, with all her absurd aristocratic airs and hints at the greatness of her family that did not know her.

He went on carefully. He fought his way with ease. He even ventured to tell her in a subdued whisper that he had never really cared for his first wife—it was a boyish infatuation, and she was older than he was—and—well, the same old vulgar story that we all know by heart and despise and don't believe in.

Mrs. Greatorrex chose to believe it, however. At the last she gave him to understand that she would urge her niece by every means in her power to accept his offer. Her refusal of him that afternoon was probably mere girlish embarrassment, she said. As for that suggestion about Dr. Dillwyn she was quite positive there was nothing in it. Agatha was as open as the day. She should have seen something of that, if the affair was serious. Girls would be girls, of course—here she smiled—and little flirtations were dear to them, but beyond a little flirtation it certainly had not gone. She would speak to Agatha, and she was sure when she had really taken to heart the generosity of the proposal made to her (she dashed the generosity—she was bent on cementing that offer about the settlements) she would listen to him with a willing ear. She was really the dearest girl—but girls are always so shy—so——. And so on *ad nauseam*.

She was looking now at the "dearest girl"—who was looking back at her with anxious eyes. She did not appear "shy," however—only very anxious and unhappy. Agatha had been listening now for the best part of an hour, to a *resumé* of Dr. Darkham's proposal of the night before—the proposal through her aunt.

She did not answer, so Mrs. Greatorrex went on.

"He told me he had spoken to you yesterday, and that you had refused him! You must have been out of your senses when you did that. He is prepared to make splendid settlements——."

"I don't care about settlements," said Agatha.

"That's what girls always say, until they are married. Then they find the difference. One *must* care about settlements. And at all events I insist upon *your* caring about them."

"I shouldn't object to settlements if—if I didn't object to—him!" said Agatha in a low voice.

"To him! To Dr. Darkham? What can you see to object to in him? He is handsome—clever——."

"He is old," said Agatha, trifling with the question as if to gain time.

"Old? He looks about forty."

"But that is old."

"It is quite young, on the contrary. A man *isn't* a man almost until he gains that age. He hardly knows his own mind till then."

"His wife is only dead three months."

"Oh, he explained all that to me, poor fellow. You know, Agatha, you could not expect a man of his cleverness, so cultured, so learned, to be overburdened with grief for the loss of a wife like that."

"Cultured! That is the last word I should apply to him. I think he is"—she hesitated—

"Is what?" in a sharp tone.

"Vulgar!" said Agatha, faintly.

"*That* is the last epithet to apply to him. My dear Agatha, consider. He is clever, as I say, and learned, and so kind and thoughtful. I'm sure his goodness to me during my illness—Now what further objection can you make?"

"I can't bear him," said Agatha, suddenly, which indeed was the conclusion of the whole matter.

"But why—why?"

"Do you know, I have asked myself that question very often," with a nervous laugh, "but I have never been able to answer it. I sometimes have queer fancies about him. I hate his eyes for one thing. I," laughing again, "think he looks like a murderer."

"My dear! At your age! I *beg*, Agatha, that you will cease to consider yourself a baby. Such a speech as that if you *were* a baby might pass muster, but for a girl who has seen her twentieth year it sounds simply foolish. I hope you are not dreaming of posing as the 'Ingénue,' than whom no other creature on earth is so tiresome, or in such bad taste. Believe me, after twenty it takes but quite a little time to get to thirty—and once *plantée là* a woman unmarried is done for. It means old-maidism. Of course girls of the present day are so advanced that they declare nothing daunts them, but I assure you most of them object to the title of 'old maid.' The most emancipated of them shy at that. They preach tremendously about the rights of women, and the growing ascendancy of woman over man—but

when the despised 'man' holds out his hand to them with a view to matrimony, see how the woman grasps at it! 'Old maid!' Hideous title isn't it? And you are getting on, my dear child, getting on—you are really. Why, when I was your age I had had six proposals. And you—have you had a single proposal, save this most fortunate one?"

She paused. Agatha did not answer. A bitter grief was driving the tears to her eyes. Oh! if *he* had only spoken before this. . . . If only she could have said "yes" to that last tormenting question. It was silly of her. She knew him—she trusted him. But to be able to *say* he had asked her to marry him would have been like honey in her mouth. Meantime Mrs. Greatorex waited relentlessly.

"Well?" she said.

"No." The answer was very faint, and it awoke in Mrs. Greatorex's mind a suspicion. Was the girl deceiving her? Was there an actual engagement between her and Dr. Dillwyn?

"No? Are you sure, Agatha? It seemed to me that you hesitated. I hope there is nothing in a certain absurd report I have heard about you and Dr. Dillwyn."

"About me—and——" nervously—

"Dr. Dillwyn"—interrupting impatiently; "yes, yes. Somebody hinted to me lately that he has had the temerity to pay you great attention. Is it so? Is there anything between you?"

"Between——"

"I beg, Agatha, you will give me an answer. Why don't you speak?"

"There is nothing to say," said she, in a low, anguished voice. Oh, that there *had* been!

"I am at liberty, then," went on her tormentor, "to tell Dr. Darkham that you are absolutely *free*—that you care for nobody—that your heart is still your own to dispose of? I may tell him that you have never felt so much as a passing fancy for this young man, Dr. Dillwyn, who has been sent here through a whim of Reginald Greatorex—to starve, as far as I can see; for Dr. Darkham, as you know, has all the paying practice, and Reginald Greatorex,"—bitterly—"as you also know, is a false friend, and a man that would rather die than part with a penny. I may tell Dr. Darkham that?"

Agatha, pale as death, lifted up her eyes and looked at her.

"Not that," she said; "do not tell him that. I"—she grew whiter and whiter, but she was true to herself and her own heart to the last—"I love Dr. Dillwyn."

"Agatha!" Mrs. Greatorex rose, and stood before her, filled with wrathful horror. To tell the truth, she was genuinely shocked. Her narrow prejudices could not conceive such a thing as this. "When he has never spoken to you—never——"

"I know. It is—it *sounds* dreadful," said the girl, wildly. "But," folding her hands upon her breast, "he will speak. He *will*."

There was a silence.

"I trust not. I believe not," said Mrs. Greatorex at last. Her tone was cold, and there was a certain element of disgust in it that hurt the girl to her very soul. Why—*why* had she spoken? And yet to deny

him! She would suffer for it, but hers was the nobler part, and in the end she would be placed above shame. But if he *never* spoke! A cold wind seemed to creep over her, chilling her through and through. It was her one doubt of him, and it died at birth, but she always repented herself of it. "In the meantime, Agatha, you must permit me to say that I am horrified beyond words at your confession. In my young days—even in this *present* day which is full of indecencies—to boldly declare that you love a man before he has told you that he loves you, would be considered beyond pardon. The only way of redeeming this error—of raising yourself again in my estimation—is to give me your word that you will from this moment abandon all thoughts of this young man, who is so evidently only amusing himself with you—and consent to an engagement with Dr. Darkham, who is most desirous of making you his wife."

"I shall never marry Dr. Darkham," said the girl, slowly, miserably, but with great courage. "Let me leave you, Aunt Hilda. Let me go out in the world as a governess. I could make my own way, perhaps—and——"

"Don't talk to me like that, Agatha. You—my niece. Do you think I am going to have you spoken of by the people here as a *paid person*? No, you shall stay here." She rose to her feet and pointed imperiously to the door. "You shall stay here and marry Dr. Darkham, and thank God for your good fortune. Now, go; leave me." She pointed again to the door, and Agatha, sad and sick at heart, went out of the room.

When she was gone Mrs. Greatorrex tried to rest again upon her lounge but failed. That slip of a girl to refuse such an offer as this! A girl who was literally penniless! She stormed and raged as she walked up and down her small room. As a fact, she had grown honestly fond of Agatha—as fond as she could be of anything outside herself; but she was fonder still of her ambition—and to see Agatha married to a man without position or money. . .

CHAPTER XIX.

“For she was wild and young and he was old.”

CHAUCER.

AGATHA went slowly down stairs, and ate no breakfast. That is the usual result of such interviews as these. She went into the garden after breakfast, and tried to do wonders with a small bed of asters, but her heart was in nothing, and when she came indoors about half-past one and changed her morning frock and made herself very pretty for luncheon, it was with a sinking heart, as she thought of meeting Aunt Hilda again.

But Aunt Hilda refused to appear—which perhaps frightened Agatha more than all that had gone before. For Mrs. Greatorrex to miss her luncheon (it was really her dinner and Agatha’s, but they always called it luncheon when people dropped in, it sounded so much better) meant that she was really offended. Agatha got through the sad little meal as quickly as possible, and then snatching her hat from the stand told herself she would go for a long, long afternoon upon the bank of the river. The Rickton river was about half a mile from the town, and there were charming little bits about it, good enough to satisfy the souls of most.

As she reached the hall door, however, the maid threw it open and the Rev. Thomas Blount stepped in. Agatha could have hated almost anybody else for his

intrusion at this moment, but Blount somehow always had a kindly boyish air about him that put an end to criticism.

"Oh, you, Mr. Blount!" said she, as if greatly pleased, and she took him into the small drawing-room and sat down to entertain him right royally. Poor thing! with her heart as heavy as lead.

She was delightful to him for five minutes, and then she felt the strain was very great. It suddenly occurred to her, that there were some engravings hung in the little ante-chamber, where she had so often—she shuddered now at the remembrance of it—so often had to stand *tête-à-tête* with Dr. Darkham whilst he gave her instructions about her aunt's treatment.

Would Mr. Blount like to see those old prints? She had heard they were valuable. Mr. Blount said he would like to see them very much, and she led him into the little chamber. He and she were standing on the threshold of it, however, when the opening of the drawing-room door beyond caught Agatha's ear.

"Some visitors, I am afraid, Mr. Blount," she said gently. "Forgive me for a moment. You can see the pictures there," pointing to them, "for yourself."

"Pray, don't think of me," said Blount. "I shall give my whole attention to these."

But did he? Agatha had gone back to the drawing-room to find Elfrida rushing towards her.

"Isn't it beautiful?" cried that small person, precipitating herself upon Agatha's neck. "Isn't it all it ought to be?" She surrendered Agatha's neck here, and stood back from her, looking at her in evidently brilliant spirits, and the latest Parisian gown. "I'm

going to be a *bona fide* countess! A real live one, too. You may put anything you like on that. Lively shall be the word for me. If he thinks he's going to keep me down, and—— Oh! Mr. Blount! You here!"

She had not known he was there; it is only fair to confess she would not have spoken like this (which was a kind of bravado, as she knew Agatha would disapprove of her engagement, and she loved Agatha) had she known Blount was so near. It is only fair also to tell that her small pretty face grew crimson as she saw him. So much grace at all events was hers.

Blount did not answer her; words, indeed, were beyond him. So it was all over!

"I think I'll come and see your engravings some other day, Miss Nesbitt," said he, as calmly as possible, though it went to Agatha's heart to see the expression in his kind young eyes. "You and Miss Firs-Robinson must have a good deal to say to each other."

He turned to Elfrida. "You see I heard," said he gravely.

"Yes." Elfrida held out her hand to him in farewell. Agatha had not made even an attempt at detaining him, the situation seemed so full of briars. "And won't you——"

Even *her* audacity failed her here. It went under when she saw his face. He took her hand, such a little hand, and held it as if in a vice for a moment.

"No, I do not congratulate you," said he, steadily.

When he was gone Agatha said quickly: "It is not true!"

"It is indeed. He proposed to me yesterday just before he left, and I accepted him."

Agatha turned away from her.

"I thought better of you," she said.

"Now that is what always puzzles me," said Elfrida, not in the least offended by Agatha's ungracious reception of her news, but with the air of one prepared to argue the question calmly, even to the death. "Why should people always think better of me? I don't see how I *can* be better. What's the matter with me?"

Agatha looked at her sadly. Her own dull, miserable story was before her.

How could a girl willingly sell herself? For title, or money, or position, or anything. And Elfrida—who was rich, who could defy the world—*she* to sell herself to that detestable man for the sake of hearing herself called Lady Ambert! In her present mood it seemed hateful—unnatural—to Agatha. Oh! how gladly would she *give* herself for love—love only.

"There is nothing the matter with you," said she. "Nothing. I won't believe there is—I won't believe either that you will marry Lord Ambert."

"I expect I shall, however. And why not? Auntie is quite delighted about it. Just fancy—she will be Ambert's 'auntie' very shortly."

She laughed involuntarily, and all at once Agatha saw Miss Firs-Robinson's large, round, rosy face, and the wonderful bonnet she always wore, and Lord Ambert's tall, slight, aristocratic figure beside her.

"Your aunt is naturally ambitious for you," she said. "But you—you——"

"Well I—I—" mimicking her, gaily—"what of me? Do you think I can't see the glitter of diamonds as well

as anyone else?—and I hear the Ambert diamonds are beyond praise.”

“What are diamonds to you, who have so much money? Why, you could buy them for yourself.”

“Well, that’s what I’m doing. I *am* buying them. Now don’t tell me I am not following your advice after all.” She spoke mockingly.

“If you took my advice you would see very little glitter in Lord Ambert’s diamonds.”

“There is the glitter of his coronet to be considered too.”

“I hate to hear you talk like that,” said Agatha, with a sudden touch of passion. She went over to the window and stood with her back to her friend.

“See here!” said Elfrida, steadily, “it’s no use you’re taking it like that; I know exactly how you feel about it, but then I am not you. Your grandfather and father never kept a store, you know, or stood behind a counter. As for what I’m going to do, I’m just bound to do it. I’ve been educated up to this all my life, and,” with a little shrug, “an education like it costs such a lot—in—in every way. It takes a big tubbing, I can tell you, to wash away the remembrance of that store, with its soap, and its candles, and——”

“Elfrida!”

“And its red herrings, I was about to say, when you so rudely interrupted me. I had a very natural and healthy curiosity about that shop when I was a child, and I found out beyond all doubt that there *were* red herrings in it. I remember how I used to long to be behind the counter, too, weighing out things; but it was

too far away, they had sent me to England very early—to be *educated*.”

“But surely your father never intended——”

“Yes, he did; and I admire him for it. He said to himself, ‘What is the good of my girl having all that money if she doesn’t gain something by it?’ Remember how hard my grandfather had worked for it, and they had their ambition, you see—it was to make me—a lady! I’m afraid they’ve failed there,” said Elfrida, with a sudden laugh. “But at all events I shall be a lady in another sense. I shall be Lady Ambert.”

“I don’t know how you can look at it like that. The throwing away of your whole life’s happiness——”

“Don’t you? Ah! but you see you have not been educated as I was. Why, only look at the name! They evidently gave it to me at my baptism with a view to my living up to it. Elfrida! quite early English. It speaks of centuries of dead and gone ancestors of illustrious origin—who I hope didn’t sell soap.”

“I don’t believe you care,” said Agatha, reproachfully, who, however, was laughing now in spite of herself. “To make a jest of everything as you do——”

“Argues that I have no heart; and a good thing, too. Auntie sometimes calls me Frid, an extra petting of my pet name Frida. But really it should be Friv. I don’t seem to care about anything, and I seldom think. I don’t allow myself. It brings wrinkles—as I read the other day in one of those ladies’ papers. Well, I must be going. You are the first person I have told of my engagement—but you needn’t flatter yourself you are the only person who knows it by this.”

"Your aunt will, I suppose, publish it abroad!" said Agatha, sadly.

"No. Lord Ambert will. He seemed very flatteringly anxious to clinch the nail. I expect he has more debts than he knows what to do with."

"But Frida," anxiously, "I hope you will take care that he does not make away with all your money."

"You bet!" said Elfrida, who really perhaps ought to have been behind that counter, "*that's* all right. I shall help him to clear the mortgages, of course by degrees, but without touching a penny of my principal."

She seemed "all there." Agatha regarded her with a glance that had for the moment a certain admiration in it. When Elfrida kissed her, saying good-bye, Agatha held her a moment and entreated her in a whisper to think—to *think*—it was not too late yet. Tears were in Agatha's eyes. And Elfrida patted her, and told her not to be a darling old duffer. When she reached the door, however, she looked back.

"Oh, there's one thing," said she, trifling with the handle of the door, "I am sorry I told you of my engagement before Mr. Blount."

"*I* am not," said Agatha bluntly, a little sternly indeed. "I am glad he knows. You would never have told him until the last moment if you had had your own way." If she had thought to overwhelm Elfrida by this harsh judgment, or reduce her to a sense of shame, she found herself mistaken.

"You're a witch!" said that naughty little person with a gay grimace. "I think I seldom met so nice a—a friend as Mr. Blount. What a pity I must lose him now."

"You have Lord Ambert instead," said Agatha, coldly. In her heart she loved Elfrida, but she was angry with her now.

"Ah! true, true," cried the culprit gaily. She ran down the steps to where her ponies were waiting for her. Agatha, though angry, followed her. It hurt her to be offended with the pretty, charming, loveable little creature, who was so wilfully making hay of her life; she even went down the steps and, without looking at Elfrida, tucked the light rug round her.

Elfrida smiled, picked up the reins, and took the whip out of its socket. The ponies sprang forward. Suddenly she checked them.

"Agatha!" she called. Agatha looked up. "After all I was wrong I *have* a heart . . . if only for *you*!"

The little fair merry face was pale now, and tears lay heavily within her blue eyes. Agatha, startled, gazed at her—but there was no time for more. The ponies were trotting up the tiny avenue, and Elfrida did not look back.

Agatha stood wondering! A heart for her. . . . If a heart for her—then why not for another? Oh! she had always known she was right about Elfrida. But this dreadful marriage. . . . She was quite sure the other to whom Elfrida's heart might sometime be given was not Lord Ambert—that cold, cruel, insolent man! Then her thoughts fell away from Elfrida. There was another dreadful marriage to be thought of! Though *that* should never take place! She took down her hat from the stand in the hall, and went through the small garden and down the hill to the river—her favourite resting-place.

CHAPTER XX.

Love on my heart from heaven fell,
Soft as the dew on flowers of spring,
Sweet as the hidden drops that swell
Their honey-throated chalice.

ON each side of her rose banks, filled with glorious colourings. Autumn, always so rich in variety, was painting everything with a lavish hand—all the tints were gorgeous, splendid, ripe. Alas! that ripeness should always mean only the coming of death. She stopped for a moment to gather some berries from the blackberry bushes, that were now laden with ebony fruit, and whose luscious darkness was well thrown out by the pale green clumps of the hart's-tongue ferns that grew beneath them.

Presently she turned the corner and came within sight of the river. It was running very swiftly to-day, being swollen by all the rain that fell last night—and leaves from the trees, yellow and red and green, were swirling down it, in the rays of a mad, hot sun.

She found her own nook at last, and sat down beneath a huge beech tree, through the branches of which the light played merrily. She flung off her hat, as though glad to feel the air upon her forehead. One could hardly believe summer was gone and autumn well advanced. Upon the dancing, hurrying river the

small lily leaves were swaying to and fro, and a blue, warm haze dyed everything a strange colour. Far away in the wood on the other side the solitary figure of an old woman picking sticks, with a scarlet kerchief bound around her head, made a spot in the picture.

Agatha sat down, and let her head fall into her hands. She knew now—now that she was at last alone—how badly she had been wanting to cry all these long *long* hours. She had been so offended. Oh! more than that. She had been really frightened. And she was frightened still. She would never marry Dr. Darkham—she did not hesitate for a moment over that; but if she were to go directly against Mrs. Greatorex, who after all was not really her aunt—only a distant cousin—what would become of her? The tears ran down her cheeks and through her clasped fingers. She was so alone—so utterly alone!

A gentle hand was laid upon her shoulder. She started violently and looked up, to find Dillwyn looking down at her.

“What is it?” asked he, softly.

“Oh, nothing. Nothing,” cried she, hurriedly. “Nothing, really.” She rose quickly to her feet and tried to smile.

“*Tell* me,” said he.

“Well, I have told you,” said she, trying to be brave. “It is nothing. Only . . . sometimes . . .” She broke down ignominiously, and covered her face with her hands. “Oh! I am unhappy—*unhappy*,” she said bitterly.

“My darling!” said the young man. He did not try to take her hands from her face, but he drew her

to him, and encircled her with his arms, and pressed her head down against his shoulder, with silent but fervent passion. He held her to him. "Agatha, you know I love you. I told myself I would not speak until I was sure that you loved me, and until I had something to offer you; but now, seeing you like this—if I can help you—" He stopped and pressed his lips to her head—"You *do* love me, Agatha?"

Agatha raised herself, and laying both her hands upon his breast looked at him. Two tears still lay upon her cheeks, but she was not crying any more. Her face was transfigured—a most heavenly light was in her eyes. Dillwyn looked back at her, wondering—he had not known she was so beautiful. He caught her to him.

"It is true," said he. "You really love me?"

"And you?"

He laughed, so gladly, holding her all the time.

"What a question. It doesn't deserve an answer. But you shall have it. Yes; I love you with all my heart and soul."

"Ah!" said Agatha. A cloud crept over her face. She looked at him.

"*Why* didn't you tell me so before?" she said.

Something in her air showed him that there was reason in the tears just shed, and he took fire immediately. Did anything threaten the life of this new-found happiness of his? If so, he was prepared to combat it to the death.

He questioned her, and then all the truth came out—Dr. Darkham's proposal, her aunt's acquiescence in it, her horror and fear. Her hand was in his as she

told him, and the nervous little fingers tightened on his in the telling. It was such a hateful story, and she had suffered so. But now——

“The infernal scoundrel!” said Dillwyn at last. She was only half through her story then. “Why, his wife isn’t three months dead.” He must have been thinking of you before her death, was in his mind, but it seemed impossible to say it. After that he heard her patiently to the end.

“I have been so frightened, so miserable,” said Agatha. Something of the effect of this speech would have been taken away if a mere outsider had been addressed, as now there was not a touch of misery about her anywhere, but Dillwyn understood her, and drawing her hand to his lips, kissed it.

“You shall never be miserable again if I can help it,” said he. “After all, Agatha, I haven’t told you about the stroke of luck that has fallen to me to-day. I’m afraid I should hardly have had the pluck to speak to you at all if it hadn’t been for that.”

“Oh, Jack!” said she, reproachfully.

“Well, I wasn’t sure how it was. I could see your aunt was against me, and I don’t blame her of course, and——”

“Then I think you ought. Fancy her wanting to marry me to Dr. Darkham.”

“A man like that! Well, that’s bad, certainly.”

“Yet you say you cannot blame her.”

“How could I blame her? Do you imagine that any aunt would like to marry a girl like you to a—a detrimental like me?”

"I should think any aunt would be glad to marry *any* girl to a man like you."

This was delightful from all points, and a good deal of business was done on the head of it.

"But look here," said Dillwyn presently. "I haven't told you about the luck. Old General Montgomery has called me in."

"No!"

"Yes. Last night. Attack of the gout. It appears they had known my mother, and had heard that I was enormously clever. I was sorry for him *then*, poor old man."

"Nonsense. He heard the truth."

"And it appears he was dissatisfied with Darkham, who was with him a week ago. There was evidently something queer about his last visit. The General wouldn't say much; he's a touchy old fellow, you know; but plainly he was offended. Of course, I shall patch it up with him and Darkham. I hate other people's shoes, but for all that it will give me a rise in the neighbourhood—the fact of having been called in, I mean."

Women are seldom magnanimous where a lover is concerned. Agatha now raised a quick protest.

"Why should you do that? If he doesn't like Dr. Darkham—and who could?—why should not you take his place?"

"It is only a momentary row, I expect. Darkham has been his doctor for a long time. But what I want you to know is that it will probably give me a fillip here; and," he drew her to him, "that will enable me to make a home for you the sooner."

"A home!" said she. The very word was music.

"*Our* home!" He looked at her, and she at him, and their lips met. "For how long have I desired this hour!" said he. "For years!"

"No, no," said she, laughing softly.

"Years, I *think*," insisted he, lover-fashion.

"Weeks—only weeks. But——"

"Very *long* weeks."

At this they both laughed, and then he went on, a little shamefacedly perhaps—true lovers are always a little shamed at heart before their loved ones.

"Will you marry me now, as I am, Agatha? Will you take the risk?"

Agatha laughed again, a sweet and delicate colour warming her face.

"What risk?" said she delightfully. "I won't let you talk of risks."

"It's a cottage," said Dillwyn, "a mere cottage."

"I love cottages," said she.

"There are only five rooms altogether."

"What can one want with more?"

"And I'm afraid the kitchen chimney smokes."

"All kitchen chimneys smoke."

"And I don't believe that girl can cook a bit."

"Then, here's a girl who can teach her!" She laid her hands lightly on her bosom.

But they didn't very long stay there. Now Dillwyn had her in his arms.

"Do you mean that you are not afraid—that you will come to me—that you are mine really—really?"

Suddenly he put her from him.

"Look here! it's a shame," said he. "You are

sacrificing your life. You had better give me up!" He caught hold of her hands, however, as he said that, and drew her to him and held her fast. "You had, indeed. But if you do, Agatha, there's an end of me."

"Oh, Jack!" said she. She was laughing, but the tears were in her eyes. Quickly she released her hands from his, and then threw them round his neck. "*I* shan't make an end of you," she said.

"Well, that's settled, I suppose," said he. "But I shall always feel I have been selfish towards you. But, however, it's done now. And, Agatha, I wish you could see the house. It's a cottage, you know."

"I know. I've seen it."

"Only the outside. But inside it isn't half bad, and there are two of the rooms very pretty, and it is covered all over with ivy. Mr. Greatorrex was very good to me on my coming here, so some of the rooms are decent enough—but"—shyly and tenderly, "hardly good enough for you."

"For me!" Agatha grew softly pink. "It would be heaven!" said she in a low tone. That he should think otherwise; that he should imagine she would not be happy with him *anywhere*. Was there ever such sweet folly?

She had not time for more thought. Perhaps there were never two lovers happier than these two, standing beside the running river, with all the world before them, and very little of its merchandise wherewith to enter on its ways.

"There is quite a nice little room on the south side," Dillwyn was saying, Agatha's cheek pressed against his,

"a very pretty room. That would be your drawing-room; and the one opposite, that would be the dining-room. It is very small, certainly: in fact the word dining-room seems too grand for it."

Here Agatha sighed heavily.

"What is it, darling?" asked he, anxiously. "You don't like the prospect? Certainly it *is* small."

"I'll tell you what it is," said she, looking at him seriously, "it is too good to be true. *All* of it. It will never be mine. That drawing-room—that dining-room—that whole lovely cottage will never be mine. It would be too much happiness. You forget Aunt Hilda. She will never give her consent—never!"

"But she is not your aunt really," said he.

"No; but she—Jack, she has been very good to me. But for her"—she paused, and her charming face grew sad—"I might have starved. I cannot forget that."

"I shall not forget it either," said Dillwyn. "And if she ever wants a friend I'm there. But for all that, Agatha, I've got to think of you too. You are mine now, you know; and one should think first of those that belong to them. And after all, I expect Mrs. Greathorex is open to reason. Once she knows you hate Darkham, and that you love me—and you do, darling, don't you?"

"Jack—as if you weren't sure!"

"Well, I am now; and I'll come up to-morrow and tell your aunt all about it."

"Oh, don't!" cried Agatha. "It will be no use; none at all. She—she is bent on this marriage with Dr. Darkham. Don't say a word for a while."

"And let you be tortured meanwhile? Not likely!" said Dillwyn. "I shall certainly speak to her to-morrow. We must make the way clear at once. I shall come up at four. I can't come earlier, because of General Montgomery; but at four."

"You won't see her," said Agatha, with a touch of triumph. "She is going over to the Monteiths after luncheon to spend a long and happy day with them, and won't be back until ten. I'm glad, do you know. I'm afraid of your speaking to her. I dread it. She will be so annoyed."

"Better get it over," said he. "But even if I can't see Mrs. Greatorrex to-morrow, I *must* see you. She will be away, you say. I can come and see you for all that, can't I?"

"Yes, come at seven. I am afraid I cannot ask you in, however. She would be so angry. But if you will come to the garden ——" She coloured painfully, and looked distressed. "I can't even give you coffee . . . I can do nothing for you," said she, the tears rising in her eyes.

He smiled. "You can!" said he. "Do you know you haven't kissed me once of your own accord?" He drew her towards him, and she lifted her face.

"Agatha!" said he, in a low tone, "I wonder if you know how I love you?"

"Oh, I know more than that," said she, with a little happy shy laugh; "I know how I love you!"

CHAPTER XXI.

“What may this mean,
That thou, dread corse
Revisitest thus the glimpses of the moon,
Making night hideous?”

It was the next day, and evening was far advanced. The idiot was sitting in the garden outside mumbling to himself, and stupidly turning and twisting a sort of white rag between his fingers. Through the dense mist in which his soul ever sat, one spark of light had penetrated. The white rag was the medium. Whenever he looked at the crumpled bit of cambric he held, the idiot seemed to feel, or to see, or to be conscious of—*something*. And that something—vague and wild as it was—meant hatred—blind, unfathomable hatred!

It had taken the place of his idolatry of his mother. She was gone—he did not know where—it was impossible for him to grasp that—but she was gone. She had been taken from him. And he knew by whom! Yes, he knew that, at all events. He could not have explained it to himself, but he knew his father had taken his mother away from him, and hatred—that “madness of the heart”—tore at his breast, crying aloud for vengeance.

He sat there, in the dying sunshine, and twisted the white rag. Whenever he looked at it, a queer vision rose within his blighted brain. His mother’s room, and

the big bed, and her hand hanging over the side of it. And over there his father . . . He used to grow confused at that point. It was impossible for him to follow it out to the end, the poor brain got so obscured; but after a few minutes or so he could see again his father rising, with something white in his hand, and then—*then*—his mother's face was under it, and—and—that was all—except his father's hand pressing—pressing—*pressing down!*

The poor boy had stolen into his mother's sick chamber during that eventful evening, and had hidden himself behind the large bed curtains. He had, indeed, squeezed himself between the bed and the wall, fearful lest the nurses should send him away. They had been a little rough with him in the beginning of the day, and he distrusted them, believing, foolishly, that they meant to harm "Sho." He had been there off and on for hours—ever since his mad effort, indeed, to bring Agatha to his mother's help—crouching, waiting, beyond the knowledge of things. To be near her was all he asked: the adoration he had for her was only the blind, wild affection of an unreasoning animal, but it carried him far.

He stood there in that cramped position, hardly breathing, waiting always, though he did not know for what. He could see well from his point of vantage, and had watched his father stoop over the silent figure on the bed. He saw him go back again to his chair, and again rise and approach the bed, this time with a handkerchief in his hand.

The poor boy had watched eagerly. Into his dull mind the sure conviction grew that with the wet hand-

kerchief his father was going to do something to his mother that would enable her to talk again to him, to caress, to fondle him. He almost betrayed himself in his delight. He did not like his father, but many things had taught him that Darkham was clever. The idiot, watching and waiting, was firmly convinced that a miracle was going to be performed with the handkerchief, that it would make the dull, dead figure on the bed talk and smile again. The white thing—the talisman—was laid upon her lips. More—it was well pressed down upon them. Now for the miracle. Hah! she had stirred! It was working! But how? But how?

After that it was always blurred—his picture. He could not remember anything more. But there lived with him, like a shadow, a mad longing to kill his father!

He sat out there playing with the white cloth he held in his hand. The day was dying down, and it grew a little chilly, as days will in September. He crept from the garden chair to the stone steps that led to the library above, where his father always sat.

The father was sitting there now, lying back in his lounging-chair and thinking. Oddly enough, in spite of himself, his thoughts ran to his dead wife. As a rule he did not permit himself to think of her, and it seemed absurd to do it now—now when he was thinking of taking a second wife.

He had come in from his round of daily visits a little fatigued. He was careful now to fatigue himself as much as possible during the daytime, it was so difficult to drop to sleep at night. He had seen Agatha for a moment, and had come home full of her—of the

sweet beauty of her gentle face—of her superior air—of the extreme coldness of the salute she gave him.

It was one of her charms, her coldness. As he sat in his chair—his back a little turned to the verandah down which the steps ran, on the lowest one of which his son was sitting, playing with his white rag—he told himself that his passion for her was intensified by her determined opposition to him. He swore to himself that he would conquer her—conquer her first, then lay himself at her feet.

The evening was wonderfully quiet. He lay back, and tried to bring up Agatha's face before him. But somehow she eluded him. He almost laughed aloud. It seemed so absurd. Her face, that was ever before him—No! He could not bring it up now—not so much as a feature. He laid his hands over his eyes, leaning back in his chair, to compel the vision. In the complete darkness, he might find her.

But he did not. . . . Instead, another face arose! Pale, cold, ghastly. Once again he was staring at his unlovely dead! That hideous face! Great Heavens! and lying there—there, sprawling on the floor with the mouth half open.

He dashed his hands from his eyes, and stood up, and stared before him, and then a yell broke from him!

Over there! . . . What *was* that over there, in the shadow? That frightful face with a white cloth laid across it. Was it she, come back to torment him?

Again he felt his hand pressing the wet handkerchief upon her nose, her mouth, and the faint struggle beneath his fingers. Such a sickening struggle!

Again he pressed, and *pressed*, until he had pressed the very life out of her!

He clutched the chimney-piece, and glared at that awful apparition. Had she come back? Was he never to be rid of her? Would she be always at his side, showing herself when—he grew almost frantic here—when his young bride was at his side?

His horror compelled movement. He loosed his desperate grasp upon the mantelpiece, and like a drunken man staggered forward. As he did so the apparition stirred, and a terrible cry sounded through the room.

“Sho!”

It was like a battle cry! As it reached his ear Darkham stood still. All at once he knew—knew everything; the boy had been in the room that night, and had seen, and in a strange way understood.

He laughed aloud. It was quite safe, that secret; the boy could neither speak nor write, and as for *her*—what a fool he was—why she was too *dull* to find her way back to earth. He laughed again at this conceit, so glad he was at the solution of this ridiculous affair. He must be out of order—in want of a tonic to have such absurd fancies.

In the meantime he advanced upon his son. Sitting out there on the verandah the idiot had conceived a splendid plan. He would lay this white thing over his face and go in and see his father; perhaps if he did, his father would understand and be frightened, and give “Sho” back to him. He had certainly taken her away. Heaven knows how this hope arose! But he crept in noiselessly and sat crouching in the corner,

waiting for his father to see him, with the handkerchief laid across his mouth and nose, exactly as he had seen it lying across hers. He sat there a long time waiting for his plan to work, before Darkham turned and saw him.

Now as his father advanced on him the idiot rose and flung the cloth from his face. He, too, advanced. After all, his father would do nothing! There was no "Sho," in spite of his plan! His father would not give her back then! Great rage awoke in his heart. He stood upright and waved his arms. His whole figure was menacing. In his wild, untranslatable dialect he shouted, and one could feel that all the terrible sounds were filled with hatred.

Hatred, too, was in the heart of Darkham—a very madness of rage. He seized the boy and held him as in a vice, and leant over him, breathing hard, as if thinking what he should do with him. The devil of murder once more rose within him. He loosened one hand and laid it on his son's throat. He tightened his grasp!

In another moment he found himself dashed backwards against the wall. His head had come against it with astounding force, and for a second he was half-stunned. He stood there panting. That creature, half his size, was stronger than he! His first thought was amazement. And the most curious thing of all was that he felt no resentment. The boy was strong! After all, Edwy could do something. He could conquer—he could kill!

The idiot had disappeared, but near where he had stood a white object could be seen. Darkham knew it

at once. It was the handkerchief with which he had (he paused involuntarily and then smiled grimly) helped his wife to Heaven. He stooped and picked it up. In spite of his hardihood he felt a sense of strong repulsion as he touched it. Her life-blood seemed to be frozen into it. He compelled himself to open it, however, and look at it. Her name was in the corner coarsely worked with red thread. She had always loved coarse things. The red was very dark, and looked in the uncertain light like a smear of blood. It was just like any other of her handkerchiefs, yet he could have sworn it was *the* one. The boy must have picked it up that night. It must have fallen from his breast pocket as he bent over the dead form upon the floor.

Well, there was nothing in it to incriminate him; still it would be as well to get rid of it. The fire had been laid in the grate, but not lighted. He dropped the handkerchief on the table, and went to find some matches on the mantelpiece. With these he stooped and lit the dry kindling, and soon the fire began to roar up the chimney.

He turned to the table to get the handkerchief. Once burned, he told himself, he would forget it—and so, too, would the boy. But apparently the boy had not forgotten it, even for a few minutes. When Darkham looked for the handkerchief it was gone. The idiot had come back for his relic.

Darkham stood and thought for a moment. No, there was no danger; and it might only excite that fool the more to compel him to restore it.

Still he felt disturbed. He went to the window. The evening was divinely fair. It would rest him and

arrange his thoughts, to go for a stroll. He would walk down towards Rickton Villa—not *to* it, exactly. Her aunt was away this evening at the Monteiths. But Agatha was sometimes in her garden at this hour, tending her flowers. There, or through the windows, he might, perhaps, get a glimpse of her.

CHAPTER XXII.

Thou art my life, my love, my heart,
The very eyes of me,
And hast command of every part
To live and die for thee.

THE evening was now merging into night. Far up above in the darkening sky a pale star or two were shining. Night falls early in September, and already the flowers in the small garden at the Villa were shutting up their pretty eyes. Through the branches of the acacias some late birds—dissipated little youngsters—were now hurrying to their roosts; as they flew the branches of the acacias bent,

“Brushed with the kiss of rustling wings.”

It was a charming evening, soft, cool, melodious. The purling of the brook below was delightful in itself, but other musics blended with it. The wind sighed so sweetly that the grasses in the meadows beyond bowed to it, in compliment no doubt, and thus made a music of their own.

The geraniums were nodding their heads and the asters,

“Of palest, delicatest blue, slender and fragile,”

were evidently very drowsy. As for the smaller flowers, they were already asleep, as children should be when the hour is eight.

A clock somewhere struck that hour.

Agatha started to her feet. The tiny summer-house was so small that her charming head almost touched its roof as she rose.

"Who could have thought it was so late?" said she. "Eight o'clock! You must go!"

The surprise in her tone was surely complimentary; but Dillwyn looked aggrieved.

"I believe you want to get rid of me," said he.

"Do you?" She stood and laughed at him. She had always been charming; but Love, when he came to her, had lent her many cosmetics, and now she was lovely. "You believe that?" She held out her hands to him. "What a story!"

He laughed in turn and took her hands, and took herself too. They kissed each other, and then with a sigh joined cheek to cheek.

"My darling! My life!" said Dillwyn, in a low tone fraught with love. "Must I go now? When shall I see you again?"

"Why, to-morrow at the Poynters'. Now do try to be there in time. Get over your cases as quickly as you can. Oh, no! *don't*. Poor things! Of course, your patients want you more than I do."

"That's the first unkind speech you have ever made me."

"But, you know—you know what I mean."

"Still, tell me that you want me, too—just as much as they do."

"I needn't!" said she, tears rising in her eyes. She smiled tremulously. "You know it!"

They had come out of the little summer-house and

were strolling towards the gate where they were to part. The night had fallen a little lower, and everything lay in a soft dusk.

It was not so dark, however, but that a figure standing just outside the gate, and hidden by a thick laurel bush, could see and hear all that was going on in this small garden.

"What a beautiful sky," said Agatha, stopping to look up at the exquisite dome above her.

Dillwyn looked up too. Yes, it was exquisite—the glittering small stars, shining like silver on that pale breast of blue! Some old lines came to him. He caught her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"Look'st thou at the stars? If I were Heaven,
With all the eyes of Heaven would I look down on thee."

"I don't know what made me think of that. Perhaps because I wish I had more eyes with which to look at you."

"Would you be the giant of old who had an eye in the back of his head?" said she. "And after all I think your verse a little rude. To look down on me!" She stood back from him, and glanced at him in the prettiest way. Happiness was developing in her a tender and joyous coquetry. "On *me!*"

"Do you know," said Dillwyn, a little sadly, "I have often thought what presumption it was on my part to dream of gaining you?"

"Oh now, now," cried she, in a little expostulatory way. She ran back to him and held out her hands. Her face expressed the greatest penitence. "Presumption—what a word! Do you know, Jack, I shall be thankful to my dying hour that you loved me?"

They were so happy! Was ever anything so sweet as *she* was? Was ever man so dear as *he*? The light was growing less and less, and even now the "huge and thoughtful night" was with them.

"Oh, you must go!" said she, raising her head. As she did so she started.

"What was that? Jack, didn't you hear something?"

"Hear something? No," said Dillwyn. He looked towards the house.

"No, no! In there," pointing to the bushes behind them. She spoke in a low whisper, and he could feel that she was trembling.

"In there? Who could be there?"

"I don't know—perhaps——"

"One of the servants? Well, what matter—tomorrow I shall tell Mrs. Greatorax all about it."

"I wasn't thinking of the servants; I was thinking—— I suppose it was foolish—but—I almost felt that Dr. Darkham was there!"

"Nonsense, darling! Though, certainly," with sudden wrath, "it would be like the skulking scoundrel to be eavesdropping." He spoke loudly—angrily. If Darkham was there he could hear.

"Still," said Agatha, nervously, "go now. Do go. I am sure I oughtn't to have let you come here at all this evening. If Aunt Hilda hears of it, she——"

"Your Aunt Hilda will hear more than that tomorrow."

"Oh, Jack, must you tell her?"

"My dearest heart! Why not? You know that——"

"Yes, yes, I know. But we are going to the Poynters'

to-morrow, Jack, and we might have a happy day there, if—— Don't tell her until after that."

"It shall be as you wish, of course. But Agatha, is it wise? However—well then, the day after to-morrow I shall speak to her. Now, are you satisfied, you lovely tyrant?"

They laughed.

"Well—well—good-bye," said she regretfully. She raised her face to his, and he caught her to his heart.

"To-morrow will never come," said he.

"Oh yes it will. It will. And it will bring you!"

They clung to each other, and kissed and kissed again. Then he left her, and she stood waving her hand to him until the scented twilight hid him from her sight.

She turned back then from the rustic gate, and took a step or two towards the house. Presently she paused, smiling—thinking hopefully of all that he had said. He loved her, as she loved him. Her face was beautiful in its delight, as she so stood thinking on her love.

Suddenly she turned, as if hearing something, and the smile faded from her lips. A shadow lay across her path. She knew quite well who it was, even before Darkham's hand was laid upon her arm!

CHAPTER XXIII.

“How easy ’tis, when destiny proves kind,
With full-spread sails to run before the wind;
But they who ’gainst stiff gales careering go,
Must be at once resolved, and skilful too.”

AGATHA remained quite still. Her heart was beating wildly, but she showed no outward sign of fear, and it was too dark now for him to see that her face was as white as death.

“Take away your hand,” she said, presently, in a tone that startled even herself; it was so calm, and with a touch of dignity in it not to be withstood. Truly “Courage mounteth with occasion.”

Darkham let her go instinctively, but he still stood facing her, and through the deepening of the night she felt that his eyes were on her. At last he spoke.

“You think you will marry him!” he said. His voice was low, not at all violent; but it frightened Agatha the more perhaps for that. At all events it rang in her ears for days afterwards.

The man’s heart was on fire! His late detestable interview with the unfortunate Edwy had driven him to seek comfort in even one glimpse at the woman he adored. All through his long and lonely walk down here from the Red House, he had lived on but one thought, and that was all made of her. He had strangely happy moments on that downward walk.

Imagination ran riot within him, and he had dreamed of days when his love would conquer her dislike, when she would willingly give herself to him—heart and body alike! He had even seen himself—poor fool!—transformed by her and her love—regenerated, washed from all his sins. His own love was so great that it could—it should—compel hers to turn to him.

As for that young Dillwyn, that would be nothing. He had Mrs. Greator's word for that. Agatha would forget so slight, so passing a dream in a month—a month passed beneath the great storm of love that he would bestow upon her.

His hopes were at fever height when he reached the villa. He had entered the tiny avenue, and come cautiously up, hidden by the rhododendrons, to that small gate inside which the girl so often at this hour ministered to her flowers.

And then he had seen her—in Dillwyn's arms.

The evening was not so far advanced, and the delicate light of a first love that lay on her beautiful face was quite clear to him. He saw her lift her arms, and let Dillwyn take her into his. They kissed each other.

He went a little mad then. He lost consciousness for a moment or two, and clung to a tree close to him. So much had been dared and done, and now was it all to be in vain?

He recovered himself presently, remembering everything, and a great oath broke from him. He swore to himself that the one terrible deed of his life should not lie fallow. Something should come of it. It should bear fruit.

To kill, as he had done (he did not mince matters with himself) and still stand with empty hands—to slay and gain nothing by the slaying. No; that thing should not be!

He withdrew into the denser shadow, and waited and watched, and listened. He was not naturally a man of base understandings. There was nothing small about him, and probably under happier circumstances he would have disdained to lie there in ambush watching and listening; but now passion mastered him, and his love for Agatha—the one pure sentiment of his life—was unhappily the undoing of him. It *should* have ennobled him—it only debased him.

He had listened steadily, coldly—with determination. The words “skulking scoundrel,” uttered by Dillwyn, had come to him on the night wind and gone home. They were doubly painful, spoken at a moment like this. “Skulking!” Truly he *was* “skulking,” here, behind this tree.

He repeated the words over and over again to himself. In his way he was a proud man. He knew that to-morrow he would despise himself, but he listened now. To-morrow he would suffer. But that word “skulking!” Well! he would remember it, and get great toll for it—later on. If Dillwyn ever dreamt he would marry this girl, he, Darkham, would prove his dreams mere nightmares. Even if it came to a last issue—if death alone could prevent that marriage, why then . . . then . . . He had begun, he would go on—to the desired end.

He told himself he was strong. It was only indeed when he saw the parting between the lovers, when he

again saw Agatha give her willing lips to Dillwyn, that despair caught him—despair, mingled with blind rage. A revulsion of feeling seized on him and shook him for the moment.

Everything seemed to be falling from him. This girl on whom his soul was set would not so much as look at him, and Dillwyn—that affair of General Montgomery's had touched him. In time, the wedge that now had got in its thin edge, would work deeper and take from him his practice. A hatred against Dillwyn had always been in his breast ever since those earliest days when first he came to Rickton, and now it blazed, and grew to monstrous dimensions.

What! was Dillwyn to "supplant him these two times?" Never. His courage came back to him. His indomitable will grew strong again. As Dillwyn passed him on his way home he raised his hand as if to strike him to the earth, but paused.

Not now. There was time enough. If he failed, well then—— His oath was uttered—she should never marry Dillwyn.

"You think you will marry him," said he again. "You think it possible to escape me." He was quite beside himself or he would hardly have dared so to speak to her.

"I don't understand you," said Agatha coldly. "It is late. I wish to go in."

"Not too late however for you to see your lover!"

"Dr. Darkham! This is not the first time you have spoken to me like this. I must ask you to let it be the last. For you to dictate to me on any subject is——"

She paused.

"Is what?"

"Impertinence," she said haughtily. "I am sure you must see it. I am nothing to you—and you are, if possible, less to me."

"You are wrong there!" He took a step nearer to her, and the girl set her teeth hard—if he were to *touch her*. At this moment the moon came out from behind a cloud and showed her his face—dark—determined, passionate. "You are all the world to me. Life itself! Do you hear? Do you understand? You are my very life! And——" there was something menacing in his air—"a man fights hard for his life." He stopped to draw his breath, apparently with difficulty, and went on, "I shall fight hard," he said.

"It is bad to fight for failure," said she. Her hands were icy cold now, but her face was impassive. "I hope you will go away now. My aunt, as you know, is not in, and——"

"Did Dillwyn know that too? That your aunt was not in? Do you think he would have come here if he had not known it?"

"I am sure he would," said the girl. There was a change in her voice as she spoke of him—a sudden tenderness—a glad delight. The man listening noticed it, and it maddened him the more.

"You are so sure of him, then? You believe in him?"

"Fully!"

"You——" He stopped short—as if to complete the sentence was beyond him. His voice was thick—uncertain. "You will tell me next," said he, leaning

forward and gazing at her threateningly, "that you love him!"

There was a pause. All at once the knowledge that she would give anything to be able to burst into tears terrified Agatha. But she would not do that, and she *would* speak. She would not deny her love in any way. She would be brave. She laid her hand upon the garden chair near her, to steady herself, and looked up.

"Yes. I love him!"

Darkham burst into a wild laugh.

"Him! Love him! A man who courts you clandestinely, who has not the courage, or the desire to do so openly. Has he spoken to your aunt? Come, what has he done? Has he asked your hand in marriage of your only guardian? Or is he playing fast and loose with you? It would not be the first time he had played that game. Why, there are tales of him in the village."

Agatha made a gesture of contempt.

"There are no tales of Dr. Dillwyn in this village or any other," she said. "As for his speaking to Mrs. Greatorrex, he would have spoken to her to-day, but that I forbade him. He will speak to her to-morrow."

"So he says, no doubt. But even if he does speak—what then? Will Mrs. Greatorrex listen to the proposals of a pauper!"

"She will, I am sure, listen to the proposals of a gentleman."

She had not meant this as a cut to him, but it went home. He writhed under it.

"She will listen to me," said he. "To me only—"

though I may not be what you in your arrogance class as a gentleman."

"Dr. Darkham, I assure you—I—" She was shocked at his reading of her words. Her face, pale and beautiful, turned to him full of contrition. It seemed terrible to her, to have even inadvertently hurt the feelings of anyone. "I did not mean that."

This sudden change on her part from extreme coldness to a faint kindness, came as the dew from heaven to Darkham. This little touch of sweetness, what might it not lead to if he pleaded with her? Pleaded with all his soul—for his soul!

"Agatha!" cried he, "hear me. I beseech you to hear me. Everything is against me; I know that; but you—if you could only understand what you are to me."

"I do not wish to understand." She broke into his stammering speech with a certain courage, but a courage that she felt was failing her. For the first time real fear seized upon her.

"You *shall* understand," said he. "When I tell you that my very soul is in your keeping——"

He broke off and tried to take her hand, but she pushed him from her. She felt terrified.

"Your soul! *Yours!*" she said. "Oh! no, no, no!"

There was such horror, such open shrinking in her whole air that he stood and looked at her. Had she heard anything? Was there a suspicion in her mind? Impossible! He dismissed that thought, but another rose. He felt now that his case was hopeless, so far as she was concerned. He was abhorrent to her. She

loathed him—and strongest lever of all against him—she loved another. Had she been free he might have won her, but he knew her well enough—and it was this knowledge that had drawn him to her—to understand that when once steadfastly determined she would be hard to move.

“You have decided?” said he.

She made a little movement to signify acquiescence.

“You deliberately choose a life of want?”

“I choose the life I wish to lead.”

“And Mrs. Greatorex. She has been good to you. You will go against her? yet you owe her something.”

“I owe her more than I can ever repay,” said Agatha with emotion. “But not the selling of my soul.”

She clasped her hands across her breast. Her voice was very sad. He had struck a chord that chilled her. It was true that Mrs. Greatorex had rescued her from poverty, but was she then to be for ever after her slave—to do her bidding—to sink herself out of sight in the personality of another? Oh! no—a thousand times no. And yet she *did* owe her something. And was she now to deny the loan?

“Disguise thyself as thou wilt, still slavery,” said I, “still thou art a bitter draught.”

Poor Agatha felt the draught very bitter at that moment.

“You have made up your mind?” said Darkham, again. His tone was a question, and the question conveyed a threat. “You absolutely refuse me? Think—think again, Agatha—*think!*”

“I have thought.”

He broke out then—

"You defy me?"

She faced him bravely even at this moment when her heart was dying within her.

"Yes, I defy you."

He drew nearer to her, and caught her arm. His face was close to hers. *Such* a face!

"To defy *me*"—he spoke below his breath—"you must be mad to defy me. Now hear me. You will never marry that fool of yours. I *shall* prevent that, even though"—he paused ominously—"I have to destroy him."

The word "destroy" might have had reference to Dillwyn's profession, but to the girl's over-wrought imagination it sounded like a death knell. Oh, to get away! To think!

She would have tried to pass him, but something warned her that such a movement would be unwise. To show cowardice of any sort in his present excited state would be madness. She held her ground bravely, and prayed to Heaven for deliverance of some sort.

And Heaven sent it.

CHAPTER XXIV.

It is the witness still of excellency
To put a strange face on his own perfections.

"THAT you, Agatha?"

A cheerful voice came to her over the gate. It was the voice of Mr. Browne. Now Dicky's voice, though good enough of its kind, had never up to this been likened to music; to Agatha, however, at this moment, it sounded like sweet harmony. She drew her breath quickly; with difficulty, indeed, she suppressed a sob. She held out her hand to him.

"Dicky, is it you? Come—come here. Come quickly!"

She did her best to suppress her agitation, but it mastered her, and Mr. Browne lifted the latch of the small gate, and in a seemingly leisurely manner (Dicky could distinguish himself sometimes), was at her side almost immediately. He took her hand (she had run to meet him), and held it in a good firm clasp. He was very fond of Agatha, and she was very fond of him too—most girls were. Though they always said he was the most useless person they knew. Agatha, however, never said that after to-night.

Of course, he saw at a glance that something was wrong. He nodded to Darkham, who was in the shadow.

"Heavenly night, isn't it?" Mr. Browne raised his

eyes ecstatically to the sky above, now liberally besprinkled with the lamps of heaven. "But there's a dew falling. Mrs. Greatorrex not ill again, I hope?"

He looked directly at Darkham, compelling an answer.

"No," said Darkham.

"So glad!" said Dicky. "Then you came—" His manner was delightful; not a suspicion in it; yet Darkham felt he must answer.

"I was merely passing by here, and saw Miss Nesbitt, and came to ask her a question," said he, doggedly. He was quite master of himself again, and spoke naturally.

"Which Miss Nesbitt, of course, didn't answer," said Dicky, airily. "I never answer questions myself. You always get let in if you do. Agatha, I hope you stood firm. Always resist the questioner."

He was making light of the situation. The babe unborn could not have seemed more innocent than Dicky at this moment. Yet Darkham, listening, cursed him in his heart.

"Miss Nesbitt, I am afraid, does not follow your lines," said he, in a suave tone. "She—you came a little late, you see—she *did* answer."

"More shame for you," said Dicky to Agatha. "See now how you encourage Darkham."

He laughed.

There were times when Mr. Browne thoroughly enjoyed himself, and this was one of them. He could see that Agatha did not understand him, but that Darkham did. He thought Darkham a common sort of fellow, with a slight veneer, and he didn't like him.

"*I* encourage him?" said Agatha.

"Why, of course. To answer the questioner is to lead him to worse mischief in the future. He will continue his persecution." He laughed quite gaily here, and brought down his hand with a resounding slap on Darkham's shoulder. It seemed the friendliest slap, but Darkham didn't seem to care about it. "Look here, Darkham, I sympathise with you. I do, indeed. People who ask questions are bores. Yet a doctor must ask them. About one's tongue, for example, or one's—better not go into it. What were you asking Miss Nessbitt about? Not *her* tongue, I hope. Agatha! You know I often warned you about it. The tongue is an unruly member—whom have you been abusing now?"

"Ask Dr. Darkham," said Agatha, who had recovered all her courage on the advent of Dicky.

"My dear girl, I think I should rather ask the rector. He would be the true physician in this case. An unruly tongue, you know. You have nothing to do with those, have you, Dr. Darkham? Don't you think Miss Nesbitt had better see the rector? Come now, your advice. . . . Advice is what one wants from you!"

"Miss Nesbitt, I am sure, does not want it," said Darkham, slowly, as his eyes met Agatha's. "She knows all I can tell her. I have given her my advice."

"Did it include the fact that the dew is falling? Agatha, my dear girl, you ought to go in, or else get a hat or a shawl or something. You ought to have warned her"—to Darkham.

"I *have* warned her!" said the latter, in a strange meaning tone.

He went towards her and held out his hand.

"Good night!" He so stood between her and Dicky, that the latter could not see that she refused to give her hand in return. "Remember," said Darkham in a low tone, "the warning!"

He stepped quietly past Dicky, who nodded to him cheerfully, and went out of the gate and down the small avenue, and into the road that led him homewards.

"Now! What on earth is it all about?" asked Mr. Browne, as the last sound of his footsteps died away.

"Oh, Dicky!" said Agatha. She had a kind of theory that a woman ought to be above surprises or fears, but lately she had begun to doubt the truth of it. She enlarged her doubts at this moment by covering her face with her hands and bursting into tears. Mr. Browne waited a moment.

"That's right," said he. "It will do you good. Nothing like tears. But look here. Why waste 'em? The weather has been awfully dry of late; just stand over these asters, will you, and give them a show."

It was horrid of him, Agatha told herself, but in spite of that she began to laugh, and when Mr. Browne had gone into the house and brought her out a little sherry and soda she felt almost herself again. She was still frightened, however—though not for *herself*.

"You're awfully done," said Mr. Browne, presently. "You ought to be in your bed instead of out here."

"I couldn't sleep," said she. "I am too miserable. Oh, Dicky, I am so frightened: and I haven't a single person to speak to."

"That's what a woman always says when she has the person near her," said Mr. Browne. "Go on," re-

signedly. "I'm the person on this occasion. Start fair, and tell me all about it."

She did it. She told him everything.

"Fancy his wanting to marry me, when his poor wife is only three months dead. Fancy his forgetting her so soon."

"I feel it brings me within the pale of crime," said Mr. Browne, mournfully. "But I feel sure that I could have forgotten her a good deal sooner."

"Oh, but Dicky, you weren't married to her."

"True," said Dicky, thoughtfully. "That's a point. There are things one should be thankful for, after all." He sighed. "And was it to-night that he laid his charms at your feet?"

"No. The day before yesterday. At least I think it was the day before yesterday, but," dejectedly, "it seems like a century ago. I've gone through so much since."

"And in the meantime?"

"Jack has asked me to marry him." She glanced up at Dicky and smiled. He thought he had never seen her look so pretty. Love had gilded her beauty. There was quite an air of triumph about her.

"If you expect me to be surprised," said he, "you're out of it. To ask you to marry him is the sort of thing that any fellow would want to do in a second. I may as well tell you, now that hope is at an end for ever, that I myself often had a desire to ask you that great question myself."

"I wish, Dicky, you would try to be sensible for even a little while," said she, impatiently. "I'm so unhappy. I've told you that Aunt Hilda has set her heart on my accepting Dr. Darkham."

"I shouldn't do that if I were you," said Mr. Browne.

"No, no. Of course not. Nothing would induce me. Not now, when Jack has told me that he—he——"

"I know," said Mr. Browne, confidentially. "You needn't go into it. I've done it myself. Usual taradiddle. Told you you were the 'only woman in the world.' It's extraordinary how a lie like that takes, when one has only to look round and see a lot more women than one wants. But it never fails."

"He never said anything like *that* to me," said Agatha, indignantly. "Do you think he is so stupid as that?"

"I never thought him stupid till this moment," said Mr. Browne, unabashed. "What on earth *did* he say to you?"

"Just that he loved me—and enough, too. But, oh! Dicky, I told you I was frightened, and I am. That dreadful man said that, rather than see me married to Jack he would destroy him!" Her voice began to tremble. "He'll do it, too; I feel he will."

"Nonsense! my good child. People can't go about destroying people nowadays. There is always the convenient hangman. And besides, though I can't exactly say I doat on Darkham, still he seems to me a most respectable person."

"To me," said Agatha, in a low tone, "he seems a murderer! Yes; I *mean* it. I am afraid of him, and I really do think, Dicky," bursting into tears, "that he will try to kill Jack. His face was frightful when he said it. Oh! perhaps he is devising some scheme now—now, this moment! I could not be deceived; there

was meaning in his eyes. Dicky," turning to him with a touch of passion, "I want to see Jack—to warn him."

"To-morrow?"

"Oh, no! Now—now! Can't I see him now? I shall go mad with thinking if I have to pass this night without giving him a word of warning."

"Look here, Agatha. It's late, you know, and Mrs. Greatorex will be home shortly, and——"

He paused. The girl knew well what he meant. Of course it was unconventional to go to her—to Dr. Dillwyn's house now; but for the sake of conventionality was she to let the man she loved be murdered? She was a little unstrung, and at this moment she firmly believed that Darkham was bent on a swift destruction of her lover. In the slow, solemn passing of the light to darkness fears grow thick, and Agatha's became unbearable.

Jack was there, in his lonely house, and unwarned! What fitter time to take a person unawares. The poor child was weakened by the events of the past few days, and could see nothing but her one sole possession cruelly done to death. That man—Darkham—had looked murderous. Oh! to go to Jack for a second only—to *tell* him. What could it matter what the world said, if he still lived!

"I don't care *when* she is home—.—" She spoke vehemently, but then checked herself. "No, no; she won't be—can't be home for a long time. It is only half-past eight now, and she will not be home till ten."

"But Dillwyn's house is half a mile away."

"But if I ran through the wood no one would see me—and—*you only* would know of it. I want just

to tell him to be on his guard. It wouldn't take me a moment. Don't you think," feverishly, "that I might go?"

"Not alone, certainly. If you *must* see him, I'll go with you."

"Oh, Dicky—how good of you! Will you, really? Then come—*come*."

"Without a hat?"

"Yes. What does a hat matter? And we haven't a moment to lose."

"Well, here goes!" said Dicky. He pulled her arm through his, and together they went out of the gate, and turning, ran down a slope that led to the wood on their left. Through this they went at full speed, the path being well defined, and Agatha's agitation giving her the speed of an Atalanta.

As they pulled up at the gate of Dillwyn's cottage, a tiny establishment, standing by itself about a quarter of a mile from the village, Dicky pulled out his watch.

"We've beaten the record," said he; "I don't believe anyone ever did the distance in so short a time. But, talking of time, Agatha, it's flying. I shall stay here, and give you just five minutes by this," tapping his watch, "to rejoin me."

"Five minutes! I shan't be *one*," said Agatha.

"You had better tell him that I brought you here, and that I shall take you back. Though," resignedly, "he will no doubt shoot me when you do so."

"Dicky! He will be so grateful."

"That," gloomily, "is not the way of lovers. And I have two to contend with. Darkham is probably sitting in a tree at this moment taking aim!"

"Oh, Dicky, *don't!*"

"And even if I escape these two, there is still Mrs. Greatorex to slay me with her tongue. There, go on, dear Agatha. If not here on your return, I trust you to put up a fitting monument to my many virtues." Agatha turned towards the house—he was really too frivolous for anything.

"I say," called Mr. Browne after her. "Five minutes, you know—not a second more."

She ran noiselessly across the grass to the lighted window where she fancied Dillwyn must be sitting, and knocked gently at the window pane. In a moment the blind was drawn up—there was a sharp ejaculation—then the window was thrown up.

CHAPTER XXV.

"Love requires not so much proofs as expressions of love. Love demands little else than the power to feel and to requite love."

"AGATHA? You!"

"Yes, yes. I have only a moment—but I *must* speak to you. After you went Dr. Darkham came—he had seen you, and——"

"Wait a moment!" His voice was stern. "Give me your hands. You must come in and tell me all." The window was very close to the ground, and she sprang to his side easily.

She was now in the room, but so great was her nervous agitation that she never once glanced round her to see what kind it was. Her lover's room. And yet she never looked at it. She thought only of him.

"Jack! I could not help coming. I felt I *should* tell you."

"My darling girl! But what——"

With her head upon his breast she told him all—her hatred, her suspicions, her fears.

Dillwyn, holding her close to his heart, laughed a little. Her fears. Her sweet, *sweet* fears!—that were all for *him*.

"You may laugh," said she, "and I am glad you do. Somehow it makes me feel less frightened. But still, be on your guard. *Do*, Jack. I dread that man."

"Say you hate him. That will satisfy me more," said Dillwyn, "though I don't think even Mrs. Greatorrex could make you be false to me now. My poor, poor little heart! Fancy your coming all this way to tell me to take care of myself."

"To keep yourself alive for my sake."

He drew her to him, and for a moment they clung to each other, heart to heart. Then again he laughed.

"Well, I'll do my best," said he.

Agatha glanced past him. She was now rewarding herself for her virtuous abstinence on her entrance. She was examining the room.

"What a lovely little room," said she.

Dillwyn coloured.

"No, no, you must not look at it," said he, taking her face between both his hands and hiding her eyes against his breast.

"But I must. I must, indeed." She drew herself free from him, and looked round. It was a small room, very barely furnished, but there were touches about it here and there—little remnants brought from his late home—a picture or two, a tiny statuette, a large bowl of flowers, a small bookcase, crowded from top to bottom with favourite writers—that redeemed it from the actual vulgarity of poverty. A poor man lived here, no doubt, but the poor man was a gentleman.

A little fire was burning on the hearth, and she went up to it, and looked down at a large arm chair close to it.

"This is where you sit," said she. There was delight and love and humour in her eyes.

He went to her and caught her hands, and pressed their palms to his lips.

"Sometimes," said he, "I have dreamt of you as sitting there—in *that* chair, close to *that* fire. A presumptuous dream!" He regarded her anxiously.

"A lovely one," said she.

"But the room must not be like this," said he. "No—a better one—larger—with a bow window, and a little garden outside, and ——. You know that house of the Becketts at the other side of the village?"

"Too big!" said she. "What I like is this—just this." She glanced at the wall near her. "What a charming picture."

"You like it? My father gave it to me a year ago. You think you could be happy here—even here? You would be content with me?"

"Content!" Her tone was answer enough. "Do not have a doubt," said she, eagerly. "Do not spoil one single moment of ours."

At this moment a whistle loud and long came to them through the open window.

Agatha started.

"I must go," said she. "Though I'm certain it can't be five minutes yet."

"Who's whistling?" asked he.

"Dicky Browne. He brought me here."

"*Browne!*"

"Yes," she smiled at him. "He said he knew you would shoot him for it. But he has been so kind. I couldn't have come but for him. I do so like Dicky, don't you?"

"Yes. But *you* mustn't like him too much."

"There is only one person in the world I like too much. But you must confess that Dicky was very good to me to-night."

"I know. But," impatiently, "I wish there was no need for anyone to be good to you except me. However, I am grateful to him. And so long as you love me—you do love me, Agatha?"

"You know it."

"Still it is so good to hear. Forgive me. I'm a jealous fool. I wish we had never to part again. And soon," said he quickly, eagerly, "you will be my very own. I shall succeed. I shall conquer fortune. I know it. I feel strong." Indeed, he looked strong as he stood before her with his hands on her shoulders, and his dark, brilliant eyes full of life and hope. "Before I met you I hardly cared for success. My work was sufficient for me. But now——" He swayed her softly, tenderly, to and fro, and laughed aloud. "What fool said that love ruined genius? I tell you, you have given me genius—you that are the soul of me—I shall *win*."

Here a second whistle, more piercing than the last, roused the night air outside.

"Oh, hang Browne," said Dillwyn, angrily. "What a hurry he is in."

"I am afraid it is getting late," said she hurriedly, going towards the window. "I shall see you to-morrow. Good-night." She held up her face to his.

"I am coming with you."

"You are not. You are not, indeed."

"Nonsense. Of course, I shall see you home!"

"Oh, Jack, you will kill me if you insist on this."

With that man, perhaps, prowling in the wood—waiting to You *shall not* come! If you do,” her voice trembling, her eyes filling with tears, “all I have gone through to-night will be done in vain. I shall not sleep a wink, but just stay awake crying with fright about you, and thinking of you as lying in that wood with——” She shuddered.

Dillwyn gave in. After all, Browne would look after her—and to keep her awake all night—that was not to be thought of. Besides, he could follow her the entire way without her knowing it, and see that she was safe.

“It shall be as you please,” said he, but she saw that he was amused.

“It is no laughing matter,” said she. “I saw how he looked when he said it, but you didn’t. Do you know I have a kind of horrid feeling that he is outside the window hiding away in the darkness? Jack!” with sudden fearful doubt, “I don’t believe you have a bolt on your hall-door.”

“There’s an excellent lock anyway,” said he. He felt a laugh might be mistaken here, so he bravely suppressed it.

“You will promise me to turn the key? And the moment I am gone, Jack, shut your shutters and fasten them tightly, and ——”

“I can see plainly you will have to marry me at once,” said Dillwyn. “You have proved to a nicety that I am not fit to take care of myself, and that in your protection alone lies my sole chance of ever seeing a green old age.”

"You don't care," said she reproachfully, "You make a jest of it all. But my heart is heavy."

He insisted on taking her out—sorely against her will—to where Dicky was waiting for her. That worthy had retreated behind a laburnum tree, and it was only when she called his name carefully that he consented to show the tip of his nose.

"No blunderbusses, I trust," said he, in a quavering tone. "I'm an orphan boy, guv'nor. Spare! Oh, spare me!"

"Come — Dicky — come," cried Agatha, in a low voice. "Oh, I hope we shall be home before Aunt Hilda."

"I'm glad you thought of it!" said Mr. Browne, wrathfully. "We've got just twenty minutes to do it in, and I'm not so young as I used to be. When next you take your walks abroad I'd be thankful to you if you'd give yourself decent time to do them in. Twice I whistled. I am sure I need hardly say, Dillwyn, that you did not try to detain her. On the contrary, I feel certain you did your utmost to hasten her departure. I hope you gave her a piece of your mind on the subject of unpunctuality. You ought, you know! You—as her lord and master."

"Dicky, are you coming?" said Agatha, severely. She turned impetuously, and moved quickly into the shadow of the trees. Really Dicky was *too* provoking! Mr. Browne, after a silent but most effective farewell to Dillwyn (who was only half pleased with him), followed her.

Just as they once more reached the little inside

gate of the Villa, the sound of wheels in the small avenue outside told them of Mrs. Greatorrex's return.

"Cut for your life!" cried Mr. Browne, in a tragic whisper, and without waiting for another word from her, he took his own advice, and bolting through the few shrubs found himself presently safe but breathless on the public road, and almost in the arms of Dillwyn.

"So you followed the dear departed after all," said Dicky. "What a thing is love! To tread in the footsteps of *her* is rapture. Or"—Mr. Browne paused and drew himself proudly up—"or else am I to understand, sir, that you distrusted me?"

Dillwyn drew his arm within his.

"You know all about it," said he. "Come back with me and have a pipe and a whisky and soda."

We all know what that meant! But Mr. Browne was of a high courage. He accepted the invitation.

CHAPTER XXVI.

"Talent is something, but tact is everything. Talent is serious, sober, grave, and respectable; tact is all that, and more, too. It is not a seventh sense, but is the life of all the five."

"GOOD gracious! it is only four o'clock, and all the day before us," said Mrs. Poynter. "And nothing to do."

"There is always one thing to be done," said Mr. Browne, mildly, but firmly. "And that is—to eat. Let us go and tackle the grapes."

"Dicky, you're a treasure," said Mrs. Poynter.

It was the next day, and quite an ideal one for late September, though that is perhaps the least capricious month of all the year. Still Mrs. Poynter hardly knew what to do with her guests. When one has been playing tennis steadily from the 1st of May to the 19th of September, even that best of games begins to pall a little. And people came so early in September—at half-past three some of them—the some of them one never wanted—because the day-light faded so soon. It was quite a relief to her when Dicky suggested the houses. But, unfortunately, the suggestion fell flat. Just a few went, but the majority remained.

Mrs. Greatorrex indeed was too comfortable to stir, and Elfrida was too amused. She had Lord Ambert leaning over her on her left, and she had enticed the curate into an argument on her right. She felt per-

fectly happy. She was never happier than when she was annoying Ambert, who was to be her husband in a month or so.

As for Mr. Browne, though he had suggested the grapes, he made no movement in their direction. He too was quite in his element. He was teasing the children with all his might.

Mrs. Poynter, if she were ever jealous of other people's possessions, at all events had no occasion to be jealous with them about their children. Her own were perfect. Little creatures of delight! Their manners, however, were not their strong point.

Vera, the youngest, sat on Mr. Browne's right knee, and Henry on his left. They held a book in their hands. It contained the poems of Dr. Watts. Their mother, who was one of the most thoughtless people in the world, was evidently determined that *they* should think, with a vengeance.

Dicky could see, however, that the little maiden on his knee hated the book.

"Go on! read us something," said Henry.

"Don't," said Vera, "it's a pig of a book."

"Hold your tongue, Vera!" said Henry, whose education was not altogether completed. He nudged Dicky. "Go on," said he, and Dicky began.

"Let dogs delight to bark and bite,
For God hath made them so——"

"I don't believe it," said Vera, who was on for battle; "God wouldn't."

"Yes, he would. He's made lots of things that fight. Lions and tigers and Pappy."

Captain Poynter was a soldier, and had served with some distinction in the Egyptian war.

"Well, *I* don't want to fight," said Vera, shaking her blonde head. She wriggled down off Dicky's lap, and ran to Agatha, who was close to her, and unfortunately very close to everyone else too. "I want to love peoples. Don't you, Aggie? Do *you* love peoples, Aggie?"

"I do, indeed; lots of peoples," said Agatha, drawing the child on to her knee. "I love you, for one."

"Oh, me!" It was plain to the public that Miss Vera thought it would be a poor person indeed who did not bow the knee to her. "But not all the other peoples?"

"Yes, I love all the other peoples, too."

"That's not true, for Mammy says that you're beastly unkind to——"

"Vera!" cried a shocked mamma.

Mrs. Poynter rose and came forward, but Miss Vera was evidently not afraid of her mammy. She kicked out her pretty silk-clad legs, and went on quite calmly. "She says you're very nasty to Dr. Darkham, but that you *do* love Dr. Dillwyn."

The little sweet, shrill voice carried very far. Too far. Mrs. Greatorrex looked up.

As for Mrs. Poynter she was crimson. She was afraid to look at Agatha, who felt as if her heart was going to stop beating. She bent over Vera—who was playing with her bangles, all unconscious of the bombshell she had just discharged—to hide her face. Mrs. Poynter was speaking to the child.

"Vera! How naughty! You are a very bold child!"

“‘Be bolde, be bolde, and everywhere be bolde,’” quoted Mr. Browne promptly. He picked up the small sinner from Agatha’s lap, and perched her on his shoulder. “I say, let us go down and see what they are doing on the courts.”

Agatha eagerly rose and went with him. When they had reached the courts the children ran away, and Agatha turned a very distressed face to him.

“Wasn’t it unfortunate?” she said. “I am sure Aunt Hilda heard her. Why should the child have said just the wrong thing?”

“That’s not a difficult one,” said Mr. Browne. “I can guess it. Just because she *is* a child.”

“I hope,” said Agatha, in a low tone and *very* nervously, “that Aunt Hilda won’t be rude to him when he comes.”

“Give him a hint. Tell him to be sensible for once in his life, and keep out of her way.”

“If I could do that.”

“Well, why can’t you? When is he coming?”

“He said he would be here at half-past four, and that he”—here she grew prettily shamefaced and very red—“would meet me in the little alley behind the rhododendrons over there. You know there is a gateway in there from the road.”

“We’ve got ten minutes,” said Mr. Browne, after a brief consultation with his watch. “Let us go and sit in the alley, and circumvent Aunt Hilda.”

It was quite easy to skirt round the players and enter the pretty secluded walk that led to nowhere but the high road—a mere *cul-de-sac* that made it unpopular with most young people. But Agatha liked the high

road, for that good white winding ribbon would bring her her Jack. She was safe here, too, in a measure; for Mrs. Greator, whose eyes were as the eyes of a ferret, would see that she had gone there with Dicky Browne, and would think to the end of the chapter that she had spent her afternoon with a most harmless detrimental. She seated herself on a wooden bench that was evidently in the last stages of decay, and Mr. Browne, who suspected it, with the usual caution that distinguished him, seated himself beside her.

"Now let us talk about it," said he, comfortably.

"There's nothing to talk about," said Agatha, mournfully. "Aunt Hilda is determined I shall marry Dr. Darkham, and I am determined that I shan't. That is all."

"Far from it. There is the other side of the question to be considered also," said Mr. Browne, assuming a magisterial air. "Aunt Hilda is determined that you shan't marry Dr. Dillwyn, and you are determined that you will. What price the winner? I back you."

"Well, I shall not give in," said she with a smile. She looked very sad, however. "I wish I were not under such obligations to her."

"What nonsense! As if she were not under obligations to you. I expect it must have been a real treat to her, when you got under her roof."

"Oh, no. I have only been a burden."

"Modesty can go too far. I can tell you, that the very fact of your having saved her from loneliness repays all your debt to her. Don't be downhearted about your obligations in that direction."

"Still—"

"You've got too much conscience," said Mr. Browne.

"You're over-ballasted; I'd throw a little overboard if I were you. And I'd keep clear of Darkham any way. He's got a nasty turn of jaw."

"He's nasty every way," said Agatha, sighing. "But then, what am I to do? Aunt Hilda is so angry, and poor Jack is——"

"*Poor!* . . . It's a conundrum," said Mr. Browne, thoughtfully. "But there must be ways of solving it."

Here he turned and caught sight of something—someone—between the branches of the rhododendrons. Dicky knew him at once. It was the tall young doctor standing at the gate. Why did he not come on? Dicky in a moment guessed that conundrum at all events. Dillwyn had come there to meet Agatha alone, and was waiting for him to go away. Mr. Browne felt, with a distinct acceleration of spirit, that Dillwyn did not know who Agatha's companion was at the moment. It is sometimes hard to distinguish people through swaying branches.

It was perhaps a little unfortunate that Nature had endowed Dicky at his birth with the spirit of mischief. It is so difficult to strangle Nature's gifts.

"We must wait, I suppose," said Agatha. Mr. Browne cast a backward glance towards the little gate.

"*He* must wait anyway," said he, sadly.

"We must both wait."

"Oh! Not both!" with a side glance towards the silent figure half seen through the branches. "It is you who are keeping *him* waiting."

"You are wrong indeed, Dicky," said the girl earnestly. "We shall wait together. I don't mind that."

"*He* might, however; especially as you are *not* together." A slight movement in the hawthorn bush that stood beside the gate emphasised this remark.

"That makes no difference," said Agatha, sweetly. "We are content to wait apart."

"Yet Dillwyn doesn't strike me as being a modern Job," said Mr. Browne, who could now see Dillwyn marching up and down before the gate in a distinctly impatient style. He had not yet recognised Dicky, and he knew Agatha had by agreement come there to meet him, and was probably doing all in her power to get rid of her troublesome companion. There was a "Will he never go away?" sort of air about him that unhappily amused Dicky.

"I told you you did not understand him—did not sympathise with him," said Agatha reproachfully.

"I do! I do!" Dicky's voice grew tearful. "Waiting for the beloved one is melancholy work; it demands all one's sympathies. I can, at this moment,"—here Dicky grew almost tragic—"enter into all his feelings. I feel with him. It may seem painful to you, Agatha, but I assure you I can actually *see* him as he waits."

"How kind, how good you are, Dicky."

"But you," said Mr. Browne, frantically, "are *you* good or kind? Is it not cruel of you to keep him waiting as you do?"

Again his eye peered through the bushes, and again he saw Dillwyn pacing to and fro.

"But what can I do?" tearfully.

"Go to him!" nobly.

"Oh! Dicky. How can I go?"

"My dear girl, the road is open before you."

"That shows," said she, sighing faintly, "how little you know about it. No, we must wait."

"Wait! It's been a good long wait already," said Mr. Browne, who really ought to have been ashamed of himself. "How much longer is it to go on?"

"I don't know," dejectedly.

"Already, I expect, he is beginning to think it a century."

"Poor dear Jack!" said she.

"He's getting jolly tired, you know."

At this Agatha flushed and looked at him. There was indignation in her glance.

"You *don't* know," said she. "You know nothing at all about it. And he is *not* getting tired. You shouldn't talk about things of which you know nothing, absolutely nothing."

"Of course you ought to know more about it, than I do. I accept the back seat. I am not your other self—that's how he puts it, isn't it? But for all that," with a stealing glance to the rear, "it seems to me that he is growing impatient."

"Oh, Dicky, I think you shouldn't say such things as that." Tears rose to her eyes.

"What else *can* I say?"

"To hint that he is impatient—"

"So he is."

"That sounds as if he were discontented."

"So he is."

"He is *not*," angrily.

"Well, my dear girl, when one sees a fellow lifting

first one leg, and then the other, and craning his neck over a gate until one fears for the vertebræ of it, one naturally does accuse him of impatience."

"He? Who?" Agatha started, and sprang to her feet and looked round.

"Why, Dillwyn. I'm certain *he* feels as if he had been waiting a century. I'll swear that *he* is growing impatient. He"—with a gentle wave of his arm towards the gateway—"has been dancing a *pas seul* there for the last ten minutes!"

Agatha looked at him for a moment only. Then she turned aside.

"I think you might have told me!" said she, her voice quick with anger.

"I might. I might," said Mr. Browne, with truly noble acquiescence. "But you said, dear Agatha, that he was not to be here for ten minutes, and I thought it might be bad for you to see him too soon."

She was not listening to him, however. She had gone towards the gate.

Dicky with a resigned smile lit a cigarette, and started for "fresh fields and pastures new."

CHAPTER XXVII.

Mordre wol out; that see we day by day.

"At last you are alone," said Dillwyn, advancing to meet her. "I thought that fellow would never go. I could only see the top of his head, and I longed for a pea-shooter."

"It was Dicky Browne. And at all events he saw you. And fancy—he wouldn't tell me you were there, just to tease me."

"Or perhaps to keep you a little longer to himself," said Dillwyn, who was too thorough a lover not to be jealous of everyone.

"What a fancy!" said Agatha, laughing. "You must have a brilliant wit to imagine Dicky in love." She stopped laughing and grew very grave. "Such an unfortunate thing has happened," said she; and she told him of the little Vera's mistake.

"What does it matter?" said he. "The sooner everyone learns that we belong to each other the better. Where is Mrs. Greatorex? If I could see her—even a word would explain matters."

"Jack, I entreat you not to speak to her here, before all these people." She grew very pale. "She is quite sure to say something dreadful to you. I *beg* you to wait."

"But for how long?"—impatiently.

"Until to-morrow at all events." And if you wait for even longer than that—— Well, well," seeing his expression, "until to-morrow. Do you know, Jack, I came here just now only to ask you to go away, and so avoid seeing Aunt Hilda at all."

"That I won't do," said Dillwyn firmly. "You are mine, and I claim you. You, yourself, of your own free will, have given yourself to me, and do you think I shall make little of that gift? No, no; come back with me to the grounds, and let all the world see how it is with us."

"You are very masterful!" said she. Tears stood in her eyes, but there was triumph in her heart. He loved her—he was proud of her.

"I am the man who loves you," said he. He caught her to him, and kissed her lips and eyes. "And you, Agatha—— You will come with me? You will not deny me—or your love."

She slipped her hand through his arm, and turned to go back to the tennis grounds. It was a most satisfactory answer. Half way down the alley, however, a sound behind them made them turn. There stood the unhappy Edwy, waving his long arms and gesticulating frantically. He must have followed Dillwyn (for whom he had a great affection) through the little gate. He was evidently in a frightful state of excitement. His face was livid, his eyes staring—he was looking through an interstice in the rhododendron hedge, and his hands, extended, were grasping the air convulsively.

"Oh! poor Edwy," said Agatha. "Something is troubling him. Let us go back."

"He has been growing much worse of late," said

Dillwyn, studying the unfortunate idiot attentively. "His mother's death seems to have preyed upon him a good deal. Poor boy, I suppose she was his sole comfort. He has grown more violent and unreasonable, and the form his increasing mania has taken is a hatred of his father. Everyone is remarking that. He cannot see him without going into a frightful state of excitement."

"Perhaps he sees him now," said Agatha.

She hurried towards the deaf idiot, who did not see her until she was quite close to him. Then he ran to her and clutched her arm; but she was not frightened—Jack was with her.

"What is it, my poor fellow?" said Dillwyn, gently, who always spoke to him as though he could hear.

He tried to release his hand from Agatha's arm. There was a difficulty about doing this, the idiot being strong; but Dillwyn had a strange influence over him. He made a slight gesture, and at once the boy turned to him, letting Agatha go.

"Sho! Sho!" he growled in his unnatural voice—a voice full of living anguish, however—pointing through the hole in the rhododendrons.

Dillwyn and Agatha followed his gaze, and saw Darkham far away over there, talking to Mrs. Greatorex, who had evidently come down to the courts.

The idiot pointed again to his father, and lifted his hands and shook them violently. There was horror and an awful hatred in his wild black eyes, that were so like Darkham's.

Agatha shuddered.

"Sho! Sho!" shouted Edwy again, not knowing that he shouted; and then he turned to Agatha, staring at

her, as if to compel her attention, and pointed again to his father, and suddenly drew a handkerchief from his pocket.

He folded it, clumsily it is true, and then, with a weird movement laid it across his mouth and nostrils, and pressed with his hands upon it. With all his *might* he pressed. It was an extraordinary, elfish performance, but realistic for all that. Forlorn, brainless as the poor idiot was, he had still managed to bring home something of the truth to Agatha.

She grew deadly pale. Had he——? Had that man murdered his wife? Oh! no. Oh! *no*—it was impossible.

The boy was still pressing his hands against his mouth, and pinching his nostrils to keep out his breath. He was growing livid. Dillwyn went to him and tore down his hands. The idiot gasped, and then laughed in that horribly foolish way so distressing in those whose minds are affected.

He was still restless, however, swaying to and fro, and uttering queer sounds. And then, suddenly, as if some sort of thought came to him, he pointed once more to his father, who stood in the distance talking to Mrs. Greatorrex, unconscious of the tragedy taking place so near him.

“Sho! Sho!” cried the poor creature again, in heartrending accents. It was as though the mere sight of his father roused all his passions within him. He kept pointing frantically to where Darkham stood, and, presently, his cry rose into a fierce scream; the scream of a wounded animal.

Dillwyn laid his hand upon his arm and drew him

gently away from the opening in the hedge through which his father could be seen. Dillwyn's own face was very pale. For the first time a suspicion that Mrs. Darkham had been foully murdered entered into his brain.

He drew Edwy back with a certain force, and the boy fell upon the ground in short but fierce convulsions.

Dillwyn loosened his collar, and soon it was all over. Edwy rose, looked strangely round him, and with a queer twitching of his features rushed past Dillwyn before he could prevent him, and disappeared into the wood.

"Poor fellow!" said Dillwyn, sadly.

Agatha struggled with herself and then burst into tears.

"My darling! What is it? *Agatha!*" The hideous thought that had come to himself he would not have revealed to her for all the world, and now a fear that she, too, had entertained it, horrified him. He held her to him, her head pressed against his breast.

"Oh! I knew it. I knew it all through; I *felt* it," sobbed she, violently. Words of Darkham's that day in the wood came back to her. "For the sake of the heaven I have lost!" *How* had he lost it? "Jack! He killed her! He murdered her!"

"Agatha, my beloved! Why have such a thought as that? You must remember that that poor boy—"

"Oh, no, no! It is true. He"—trembling—"he smothered her! Didn't you see how Edwy pressed that handkerchief across his own nose and mouth, as if to *show* something? And you tell me the poor boy has

shown hatred to his father of late. It is plain. It is quite, *quite* plain. Oh! poor boy. Jack," in a nervous whisper—she was now shaking from head to foot—"he must have *seen* it. *Seen* his father kill his mother!" She cowered as if in terror.

"Agatha, I entreat you to compose yourself. All this is mere supposition."

"It is not. It is all the awful terrible truth! And what frightens me is, that he will kill *you*, too, if he can. You laughed at me last night. You made light of my fears, but I tell you to beware of him." She burst into bitter weeping again. "I am *sure* he will try to kill you, and you—you will do nothing to save yourself—not even for my sake. And yet you say you love me."

"Love seems a poor word," said Dillwyn. "My dear, *dear* girl, have pity on me, if not upon yourself. Don't cry like that. I'll do anything you like—*anything* if you will only try and be happy again. Why, look here now, Agatha, it isn't altogether so easy a matter to murder a person without being found out, as you seem to imagine."

"It was easy enough to murder her at all events."

"Ah, but she was at his mercy, poor soul!" He had forgotten himself in his own thoughts.

"You, too, then," eagerly, "think that——"

"It is impossible to know what to think," said he, with some emotion. He paced to and fro upon the path, his head down-bent pondering. Suddenly he lifted it. "Look here, this has got nothing to do with us, anyway," he said. "Why spoil this hour because of it?"

"It has something to do with *me*, at all events," said the girl, who was now deadly pale. "I have a weight upon my heart, Jack! I *must* tell you about it." She drew her breath sharply, but with a great courage went on. "I think now—I hardly understood it then—but I think that before his wife died he——wished to marry me."

"Well!" Dillwyn's face was hard and cold. But he caught her to him and pressed her face down against him. It would be easier for her to speak like that, where her face could not be seen. His poor, poor darling. What she had gone through.

"Well," miserably, "I think now that but for me—he—he might not have killed her! *Oh Jack!*"

Jack lifted her face and kissed her.

"Think something else," said he. "That you are my own brave girl, and that morbid thoughts are unworthy of you. Even if what you say was the case, Agatha, still it leaves your soul as white as heaven. There now, beloved! Will you grieve me? Think one thing more, Agatha. Think of me and of my love for you; my undying love. If that will not help you—then—" with a tender smile, "I shall be afraid you do not care for it."

She clung to him.

"I'm afraid after all you will have your own way, and that I shall not be able to speak to Mrs. Greatorex to-day," said he presently. "Your eyes are sad tell-tales. Come with me into the wood, and down to the river. There we can bathe them."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

“Well, honour is the subject of my story.
I cannot tell what you and other men
Think of this life.”

THEY were bathed. And very efficiently. Of course if a person takes an hour to such bathing, the results must be satisfactory. And as a fact it took Agatha and Jack Dillwyn quite an hour to get back to the others. The first two they met were Elfrida and Mr. Blount sitting *tête-à-tête* on an innocent garden chair.

It struck Agatha as a little peculiar that Elfrida, who usually hailed her appearance with rapture, now let her go by with the kindest, the friendliest of nods. The thought struck her that Elfrida knew that she loved Jack, and would for that reason not detain her, but afterwards it came to her that she merely wanted to be alone with Mr. Blount. There were certainly some things about Elfrida that puzzled her. If she had not loved the wayward little creature she would have put it otherwise. She would have said to herself there were things about Elfrida that ought to be condemned.

But Elfrida was superior to criticism. As Agatha went by she turned to her companion.

“I do love Agatha. Don’t you?”

“I like her,” said the curate.

"Oh! that—One likes so many. Why don't you love her?"

"Because I can only love one," said he. He looked at her and there was anger in his eyes. Really she told herself he was not like a curate at all. There were times when he could make a rush as well as another. Elfrida dropped her own eyes. They were growing too amused.

"It would be indiscreet, of course, to ask about the 'one,'" said she. "No one, not even a stupid person like me, could go so far as that. Indeed, I expect—judging from your expression at this moment——" she laughed a little—"that it would be more than my life is worth to ask such a question."

Blount by this time had recovered himself. He showed her quite a brave front. He was the saddest man on earth at that moment, I believe, yet he told himself he would die rather than let her know it.

"Your life!" said he. "Surely it is more valuable than all that comes to. A question addressed to me, by you, could hardly endanger your existence."

Perhaps she was a little chagrined at his sudden strength—at his calm taking of her question. Certainly her face changed.

"How can I tell?" said she petulantly. "One never knows what one's life is worth." She turned aside and stood with a frowning brow, as if thinking. Suddenly she turned to him again. The frown had gone. The smile was back again. The coquette was once more herself.

"What is *your* life worth?" asked she. Her face was radiant now; her eyes were fixed on his; her little

slender figure seemed quite filled anew with hopeless frivolity.

"Nothing!" said Blount. He spoke the word quite evenly, with a smile, indeed; but in spite of his effort a terrible sadness underlay, and dominated his intonation. What was life without love? And love was a thing the Fates refused him. Whom could he love indeed, having once seen her?

To-day she seemed sweeter than ever to him—now when he knew that she was pledged to Ambert. He told himself that she was denying her better nature in marrying for position—that frivolity was not her certain *rôle*, that there was strength in her if she would only acknowledge it. . . .

And in truth there was great character in the small face; great gaiety, too, some humour, an immense wilfulness, and, alas, too much ambition!

"Ah! you underrate yourself," said she. She shrugged her dainty shoulders. It seemed to Blount that the small heiress of innumerable thousands regarded him with rather a disdainful glance. "Every one's life is worth something. And one should prove it. That is the principal thing—to prove one's life worth something."

"How are you going to prove yours worthy?" Blount asked this question, slowly, deliberately.

She flushed crimson.

"Oh! To be rude is not to be argumentative," said she, and turned abruptly away from him, and crossed to where Mrs. Poynter stood, surrounded by a bevy of friends.

Blount stood still. He did not attempt to follow

her. Why should he? He was in the right. He had given her a hint as to the way she was going. . . . But were his motives pure? Did he speak for her good alone, or—for his? He thought a long time, and then decided that even if she were nothing to him, he would so have spoken.

But he loathed himself all the same for having spoken. . . . Her face as she left him! He had hurt her. . . .

Everyone was saying goodbye now; Mrs. Greatorex had beamed her sweetest on Mrs. Poynter, and had accepted Dr. Darkham's arm to the fly. How Agatha hated that fly! It was full of nothing but lectures, and scandals, and frowns—if one left out the moths and the must.

The poor child felt now there was electricity in the air, as, avoiding Darkham's hand, she sprang into the dingy vehicle, and seated herself beside Mrs. Greatorex. She had been quite aware that Dr. Darkham had spent the last half hour with Mrs. Greatorex, and she felt certain that a catalogue of all her crimes during last night had been played upon her aunt's mind, with variations!

She sat, looking as usual as possible until the entrance gate was passed, and then by a sudden movement of Mrs. Greatorex's figure she knew that wrath was about to descend upon her.

"What am I to understand by this, Agatha?"

"By what, Aunt Hilda?" It was the old way of gaining time.

"You heard that child, I presume. Such an *exposé*. All children are odious, but that child of Mrs.

Poynter's—. However, I have nothing to do with her. It is with you, Agatha, I have to do. Am I to understand that you are determined to take your own way—to try your will against mine?”

“Why should you talk to me like that?” cried the girl with great agitation. “Do I not know what you have done for me? How you have saved me from starvation. But Aunt Hilda, what can I do? Would you have me marry a man I hate?” She suppressed herself by an effort. She felt her temper was getting beyond control, and then said again in a lower tone, but with even more conviction. “A man I hate!”

“A man, however, whom you will marry,” said Mrs. Greatorex, with cold decision. “The marriage is arranged, Agatha, and I trust you have sufficient *savoir faire* to understand that to make a scandal in an affair of this kind is merely to prove yourself very much wanting in the usages of society. Dr. Darkham and I have been talking it over, and we have arranged that the marriage is to take place next April.”

“The marriage will never take place,” said Agatha. “I shall never marry Dr. Darkham. Aunt Hilda”—passionately—“how can you wish me to marry him. Him! That dreadful man, who ——”

She grew silent. All at once she saw the poor idiot with the cloth across his mouth. She grew silent—trembling from head to heel.

“You are a mere child, and do not know what is good for you,” said Mrs. Greatorex. “You have insane fancies, that can never come to anything. I really believe you think yourself in love with that young man whom Reginald Greatorex has foisted on us, and who

has not so much as done you the honour to ask you in marriage."

"You are wrong there," said Agatha, in a low tone, but such a triumphant tone. "Dr. Dillwyn *has* asked me to marry him."

"He has!" Mrs. Greatorrex turned upon her, her light brown eyes flashing. "And you never told me. Is this your return to me for all my goodness?"

"How could I speak?" Agatha was white to her lips. "How could I? You would have been so angry—you would not listen—you——"

She would have tried to go on and explain, but Mrs. Greatorrex broke into her disjointed, terrified speech in a sort of fury.

"So it is true, then? I didn't believe it of you. But Mr. Darkham told me of your disgraceful conduct last night."

For a moment Agatha's heart stood still. Had she heard that she went to Jack's house? Had he—Darkham—watched her, followed her, and told of it? In another moment, however, the blood flew back to her veins again.

"That you so far forgot yourself as to receive him, alone, in the arbour, up to half-past eight without a soul near you?"

"He wished to see you—to explain. He wished to come up yesterday to ask your permission."

"To ask it when he knew I was away——"

"He did not know you were to be away at first. It was I who told him. He wanted to see you very much."

"And I want to see him very much." Her voice

struck cold to the girl's heart. "I am so desirous of seeing him that I have sent a note to him"—she frowned, her brow darkened—"commanding his presence at my house to-morrow at twelve o'clock, to inquire into his flirtation with my niece."

"I hope you have not done that," said the girl, turning very pale.

"Certainly I have done it. And I wish you to be in, Agatha, at that time."

"I shall be in," said Agatha. "But to summon him like that—to insult him—in my presence." Her voice was unsteady, she was trembling. "It will do no good!" said she, despairingly.

"I think it will. At all events I shall try it. This silly intrigue must be brought to an end at once, and after that you shall marry Dr. Darkham."

"I shall not do that, Aunt Hilda," said Agatha, in a low but determined voice.

CHAPTER XXIX.

The strange winds sigh above
The bending trees,
And strange and sad days, love,
May follow these.
What care we, darling, now,
Since love, sweet love, is ours,
For winter blasts that rob
The summer flowers?

DILLWYN had received Mrs. Greatorex's note with joy. Here was the meeting he had hoped to gain by a manoeuvre actually given him by the enemy. He reached the villa next morning so much before the appointed hour that he had to stroll up and down the road until his watch told him he might march to the attack. It struck twelve by Mrs. Greatorex's tiny hall clock as he walked into her house.

She was in the drawing-room awaiting him. She gave him her hand, certainly, but a very unpleasant glance with it. She looked cold, calm, determined. The young man regarding her could have laughed aloud, only that he felt so sad. What was the good of it all? He knew himself, and he knew the girl he loved, and—who could part them?

And over there in the window was the girl he loved, standing up bravely, with a little troubled smile upon her lips—but still a smile—and all for him. What a stout heart she had—his dear and pretty girl!

"I am glad you have come, Dr. Dillwyn," said Mrs. Greatorex. "Agatha refused me her confidence, but I have heard from other sources of your—you must forgive me if I call them presumptuous—attentions to my niece. Of course, considering your position in life, I do not take them seriously; but such as they are, they rather prejudice her chances of making an excellent marriage."

"I am afraid you will have to take my attentions seriously," said Dillwyn, looking at her very quietly, but with purpose on his brow. "Indeed, I am sure of it. I love Miss Nesbitt, and she,—” he hesitated,—it is always difficult for a young man to say that a girl loves him, and Agatha, seeing his uncertainty, stepped bravely into the breach.

"Loves you!" said she, in a low, frightened, but very clear tone.

Mrs. Greatorex looked at her.

"Were all my words in vain? Have you not yet learned the meaning of modesty? Stand back, Agatha, whilst I speak."

The girl retreated a little, more from habit than anything else, and Mrs. Greatorex once more addressed Dillwyn.

"I want just an answer to one question," said she. "If you were to marry my niece, could you support her—in even such small comfort as she has been accustomed to?"

"Not now, perhaps. But we have both time before us, and we can wait a little while;" he looked at her intently. "I shall conquer in the end. I know that."

"It is probable," said Mrs. Greatorex, in quite a

liberal sort of spirit. "But in the meantime you condemn the girl you profess to love to certain privation! You know as well as I do that a very desirable marriage has been arranged for her, yet in spite of that, in spite of your love for her, you would coerce her to a waiting for years—a very precarious waiting—the end of which *may* possibly arrive, but only when both of you are too old to enjoy the best things of earth." She looked straight at Dillwyn—she stood so that he could not see the imploring glance of Agatha. But Agatha would not have loved him, nor would he have loved her had he wanted encouragement of any sort, where his truth to her, or hers to him, were concerned.

"I don't believe in marriages where love is left out," said he.

"But you do believe in love where a girl delicately nurtured is exposed to absolute poverty!"

Agatha came forward again.

"It would not be poverty," she said, softly.

"It would. I have already forbidden you to interfere, Agatha." Mrs. Greatorex, after this rebuke, turned to Dillwyn.

"So you think that to wilfully destroy a girl's chance in life means love?"

"A girl's chance! There is but one chance for any soul living, man or woman," said Dillwyn. "And that is to follow the straight road—the dictates of his or her own conscience. Why should Agatha diverge from it? Why should she sell all that is most dear to her—herself—her mind—all—for mere dross? It is absurd!" He made a gesture of impatience. "She will not do it,"

he said. He looked towards the girl. She looked back at him. It was a lovely look.

"I am to believe then," said Mrs. Greatorex, "that you have made up your mind to drag Agatha down with you into the abyss of poverty. Have you thought of the selfishness of that?"

"I hope it will not be poverty," said Dillwyn, slowly.

"How can you hope that? You know what your own position is, and you know also that you are compelling her to resign a position that——"

"Would make her the most miserable woman in England," said Dillwyn. For the first time in this unpleasant interview he addressed Agatha. He went to her, holding out his hands, and she ran to him and laid her own within them. "I am not compelling you?" asked he.

"I love you!" returned she, in a sweet whisper.

Such an answer coming now was eminently satisfactory. Dillwyn caught her to him and held her firmly. He was sorely put to it not to kiss her, but he felt the moment was not a kissing one.

Mrs. Greatorex's brow grew dark. "Agatha, come here!" said she, in a tone of extreme anger.

But Agatha did not stir. She was evidently very comfortable where she was, and her sweet proximity strengthened Dillwyn.

"She is mine!" said he; "I claim her. Mrs. Greatorex, why would you part us?"

"For her good—and specially now. You refuse to consider how you are injuring her. An advantage has fallen into her life, and you most wilfully deprive her of it."

"An advantage! Darkham do you mean? As for that," said Dillwyn, "I am not depriving her of an advantage. I am saving her from"—he paused—"misery. Agatha!" He laid his hands on her shoulders and held her back from him, and studied her a moment. It was a most sweet study. "You believe me?"

"I believe you always!" She clung closer to him, and looked with a strange sort of sad defiance over her shoulder at Mrs. Greatorex.

"The matter is not ended yet," said the latter. "I beg, Dr. Dillwyn, that you will leave me. And you, Agatha—you—"

"Oh, do not be so angry with me!" cried the girl, thrusting Dillwyn from her, and running to the woman who had befriended her so long, and catching her in her strong young arms, and holding her. She was mistaken—wrong. She would hurry her into a marriage that meant death to her—but she did not know. Agatha at that moment assured herself that Mrs. Greatorex *could* not know. "Aunt Hilda, think—think—"

"Of what?" Mrs. Greatorex had shaken herself a little free of her. But the girl still clung to her coaxingly.

"Of how much nicer Jack is than Dr. Darkham!" said she. The words were spoken in a mere whisper.

"I never spend my thoughts on absurdities," said Mrs. Greatorex. She disengaged herself finally from Agatha and turned to Dillwyn.

"You of course understand that your visits here are at an end," said she; "and your acquaintance with my niece also."

Dillwyn bowed.

"My visits shall be at an end, of course; but my acquaintance with Miss Nesbitt—"

"What, sir! After all I have said—after representing to you that you are damaging her fortune—you refuse to withdraw your—"

"Claim!" He suggested the word. "Yes; I refuse."

"You are aware that she will not have a penny from me on her marriage with you or *ever?*"

"How could the consideration of money attach itself to her?" said he, with a tender smile—his eyes were now on Agatha. "Surely she herself—— How could one think of money?" said he.

He went forward and drew Agatha into his arms and kissed her. It was the simplest action. He then bowed to Mrs. Greatorrex and left the room.

CHAPTER XXX.

I know him—a notorious liar! Think him a great way fool; solely a coward.

“WHAT a heavenly spot,” said Mrs. Poynter. She looked up through the overhanging trees to the blue expanse of the sky beyond. The spot was all soft moss and grass, shaded by nature’s umbrellas from the sun up there. The scene was quite idyllic—a little green spot within a wood, with ferns around it, a glorious heaven overhead, and in the near distance a little ripple of water.

Lord Ambert had chosen this place for his tea with most consummate care and a very artistic eye. Elfrida told him so on her arrival—which was late; she was in fact the very last to appear upon the scene.

This was not to be remarked upon, of course. A great many people elect to come late to functions of all sorts. It prevents them being fatigued to death, they tell you, but as for Elfrida, her late coming had nothing to do with that. She had discovered early in the day that Ambert had not invited Mr. Blount to his gipsy tea, and it annoyed her. It was so snobbish of Ambert to ignore a man because he was poor. And one is always angry when one’s future husband has made himself contemptible.

So she came late! She was very delightful to every-

body during tea, however, and quite subjugated two young men from the barracks in the next town. If she was cold to Ambert it was in such a careful manner that no one understood it but himself. He, however, did understand it, and his courage failed him a little. He cursed the curate in his heart. How if after all there was something in that? If this rich American plebeian failed him, how was he to arrange his affairs—how was he to live?

After tea the party broke up. Here and there by twos and threes they disappeared into the wood. When Ambert looked round for Elfrida he found she, too, had gone away somewhere, with one of the young soldiers. Certainly, she had not waited for him—for *him*, the man she had promised to marry!

With a heart soured and enraged, he turned away and, plunging through a brake, came out into a level bit of ground beyond. He stood there, thinking a moment. The knowledge that there was no one near him, that he was quite alone, forsaken in a certain sense, and that she was enjoying herself elsewhere, heightened the sense of vicious anger within his heart. He told himself that he would like to punish her—to bring her to his feet—and by Heaven he would when the law made her amenable to him. In the meantime, if he could only——

There was a little rustling amongst the brambles on his left. Hah! He looked towards the sound, slunk behind a tree and waited. Fellows after rabbits, of course. He waited quite three minutes, and then a little boy came out, looked eagerly around him, and then whistled softly.

He was quite a little lad, and delicate-looking: he was whistling to a companion, whom he supposed to be some yards away, to come and help him to gather the nuts from some wonderful tree he had seen just now. The companion, however, had probably seen Ambert, who was a terror in the neighbourhood, and had taken to his heels.

But to Ambert just now the boy's guilt seemed sure. He was in that frame of mind when he *wished* for guilt—when he desired to accuse somebody of something. And certainly of late the Ambert woods had been poached persistently for rabbits. No doubt this boy was a sort of decoy duck, sent forward to report progress, to say whether the gins were full or empty. Well, he could teach the decoy something.

He sprang forward and caught the child by the arm and dragged him into the open. The boy struggled a moment and then grew very white. Ambert was well-known amongst his tenantry. The smaller members were always sure of one thing from him—a kick, a curse, or a cuff. He was most liberal with these donations.

“What are you doing here?” said Ambert, shaking him until the boy's teeth chattered in his head with fear. “Rabbits, eh? I'll show you what comes of rabbiting.”

He grasped the collar of the boy's coat, and lifted the cane he held. Down it came, and down and down again—a heavy shower of blows on the little fellow's thin shoulders. The boy cried and moaned and wriggled, and every cry and moan gave Ambert joy. It was delightful to him in his present mood to be able

to torture somebody; for choice he would have made it Elfrida, but as that could not be, the boy was most convenient.

At length, as the blows grew and grew, the poor little shoulders grew redder and sorer. The boy's cries at last rose into a wild shriek! It was at this moment that Tom Blount, who often made this part of the wood a short cut to the village when on his rounds amongst his parishioners, came into view.

He stopped for a second as if stricken dumb with amazement—then he ran forward. He knew the boy well—little George Robins! He was indeed very fond of the delicate child. He had a desperately warm heart — poor Blount!

“What are you doing?” cried he, in an infuriated voice. It maddened him to hear the child's cries. He crashed through some underwood that lay before him, and coming up to Ambert, dragged the boy away from him, and flung him behind him. Such a careful flinging—always holding the boy until he was steady on his feet—then letting him go.

Ambert turned upon the curate furiously.

“What the devil are you doing here, sir, in my wood? What brought you here to-day? Sneaking—eh?”

“Run home, George,” said the curate to the boy, who was standing trembling behind him.

“How dare you interfere?” said Ambert. “That boy shall not go. I have not done with him yet.”

“You have done with him! I'll see that you don't touch him again. Why, you've nearly done for him for ever,” said he, looking at the boy, who was shaking nervously, and down whose face the blood was streaming

from a last cut of Ambert's cane. "To attack a child like that!" cried Blount, fuming—the blood was sickening him. "What do you mean by it, *you brute?*" Blount had now indeed completely lost his temper.

They were both so enraged that neither of them saw Elfrida as she came out slowly from between the bushes. She was accompanied by Dicky Browne, Agatha and John Dillwyn. This little party stood, silent, astonished at what was going on. They were behind the two men and standing amongst the tall bracken could hardly be seen, even had they been in front. Ambert and Blount were very plain to them, and the little trembling child too, with the blood running down his face.

Elfrida, with a queer crushing gesture, closed her fingers on Agatha's arm. She was very fond of children.

It was here that Ambert, who was a big man, made a movement to push Blount aside, but the curate, though spare, knew a thing or two about boxing. He did something or other to Ambert, and then looked back at the boy.

"Run away, George. Go home, I tell you; you're all right."

The frightened child, who had been rather stunned at first, now understood him, and turning, rushed for his home as swift as a hound let loose from his leash.

"You think you have got the better of me," said Ambert, white with rage. His anger raised his voice, and every sound went clearly to where Elfrida was standing. "But I'll be even with you yet. I'll have you up, sir, for trespass. What are you doing in my

wood? Peeping, prying, on pretence of parochial work? I know you parsons—a contemptible, sneaking lot.”

“You seem to know a great deal,” said Tom Blount, who was trying to control himself. “But there is one thing you *don’t* know—and that is how to behave yourself as a gentleman.”

“Do you think you are qualified to lecture on that subject?” said Ambert, whose rage was now at white heat. “Do you think I don’t see through you, you beggar? Do you think I haven’t noticed how you laid siege to Miss Robinson, with a view to making yourself comfortable on her fortune.”

“If I weren’t a clergyman,” said Blount, who was now as white as death, and whose nostrils were dilated, “I’d thrash you within an inch of your life for that speech.”

Ambert laughed insultingly.

“It is easy to shield oneself behind one’s cloth,” said he. Now this was a little rash of him, but then he didn’t know it. “And of course I can allow for a little chagrin on your part. Miss Robinson . . .”

“Don’t bring her into this,” said Blount. He drew nearer, and if Ambert hadn’t been a fool as well as a coward he might have seen that the man was dangerous. “Look here——” He struggled for words to express his rage, but they didn’t come.

“And why not?” said Ambert, who was a cur of the first water, and now thought to derive some fun out of the curate. “Of course, I know it is a sore subject. She played with you, didn’t she?”—he grinned into the other’s face—“as a cat would play with a mouse. But after all, she wasn’t going to throw herself away

on"—he paused, with the plain design of making his insult worse—"on a common fellow like you!"

He knew Blount was of good family and he thus purposely affronted him.

"Confound you, sir," roared the curate. "Say that again and I'll knock every one of your damned teeth down your throat!"

Poor Blount. He had forgotten everything now—his cloth, his position, his vows to Heaven, even the Bishop. He was back once more at Oxford in his fighting days.

Ambert laughed in his usual slow, sneering way. He did not believe that Blount would make his word good, he had been so patient up to this—all through his (Ambert's) courtship of Elfrida. "Are you desirous of hearing it again?" said he. He laughed. "After all, what is there to be offended at? You *are* a common fellow, aren't you?"

Blount took one step forward, and caught him by the collar. Then he wrenched the cane out of his hand, and then—well, he enjoyed himself thoroughly for fully five minutes. At the end of that time Ambert was lying on the ground cursing but cowed, and the curate was standing over him. It had been a great five minutes.

"There; get up!" said Blount.

And Ambert rose slowly, sullenly, to his feet.

"You'll hear more of this, sir," said he; but his attempt at dignity was sadly spoiled by the fact that he was covered with dust, and that he had evidently a very strongly-developed desire to keep out of range of Blount.

"Oh, go home!" said the curate, contemptuously.

Ambert took his advice. He limped quietly through the trees beyond, to where he knew of a side-walk that would take him to his house in ten minutes. He cursed and whimpered as he went. Who was going to explain his absence to his guests? He found a ray of comfort in the thought that Elfrida—that nobody but the curate knew: and he was a big man and the curate nobody; and of course, as there were no witnesses, the big man's story would be believed.

But, alas! for his hopes; we know there had been several witnesses, one of whom had been very desirous of going forward to stop the dispute, but Dicky Browne would not hear of it.

"Fair play, my good child," said he, and he had held Elfrida firmly by the arm, and compelled her to see the fray out to the bitter end. The end had undoubtedly proved the curate the better man in every way.

Of course, if Elfrida had really wished to interfere it would have been the simplest thing in the world for her to call aloud to Ambert; that would have checked the fracas before it came to any serious proportions, but oddly enough, after her one protest to Mr. Browne, she had stood looking on, as if spellbound. She had heard everything—seen everything. She had not even shown anger when Dicky went into silent hysterics over Ambert's appearance as he rose from the ground covered with dust and his coat considerably the worse for wear. To Mr. Browne the sight of Ambert (whom he detested) with his hat off and his hair all over his head in the most extraordinary fashion, and his shirt pulled up, and

his left sock pulled down, afforded the most unqualified delight. The whole affair was full of interest.

As Ambert slunk away between the trees, Mr. Browne darted forward and up to Blount (who was standing somewhat absorbed in thought apparently) and wrapped him in a warm embrace.

"Blount! how I love you!" cried he, sentimentally. "Oh, Tom! what a treat you've given me. You couldn't do it all over again, could you?"

Tom regarded him somewhat ruefully.

"What the deuce am I to say to the Bishop?" said he. He looked quite limp now. The light of battle had died from his eyes.

"Nothing; not a word!" said Dicky. "Do you think that beggar won't be glad to keep his skinning quiet? You put your trust in Providence, Tom, and his fears of a social scorching, and you'll come up all right."

"Providence!" said poor Blount. He seemed conscience-stricken. "After all, I shouldn't have thrashed him, Browne. It—it was unclerical—unchristian, you know."

"It was the most Christian act of your life," said Mr. Browne. "It was an act of martyrdom. Because if you hadn't done it, somebody else would, and so you've saved the soul of another. See?"

"I don't," said Blount. "I ought to have argued with him—borne with him."

"And been trampled under foot by him. Not a bit of it. Come along with me. Elfrida is in here, and she——"

"Miss Firs-Robinson!" The curate grew crimson. "She——she didn't——"

"Yes, she did. And a good thing too. Come and speak to her."

"Are you *mad?*" said Blount. He gathered up his hat and a few other things that had come off during the skirmish—and fled for his life.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"Her pure and eloquent blood
Spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought
That one might almost say her body thought."

"WELL," said Elfrida angrily, when Mr. Browne got back to her. "You think him very brave, of course, but why did he run away like that?"

"Ambert? You'll have to ask him that. I'm only a little man—and I should be afraid."

"You're a most annoying man anyway." Elfrida made an irritated movement. "I wasn't thinking of Ambert. *He's* all right."

"Well, I'm not so sure," said Mr. Browne, thoughtfully.

"At all events, I don't care whether he is or not," said Elfrida, with now undissembled wrath. "What I want to know is why Mr. Blount ran away just now. What was the matter with him? What did he expect?"

"Excommunication!" said Mr. Browne, solemnly.

"Nonsense," petulantly. "I suppose you mean he is afraid of the Bishop—and very rightly, too."

"Well, I don't," said Mr. Browne. "I think he is afraid of you."

Elfrida made a petulant gesture, and Agatha said gently—

"It was the last thing Mr. Blount would have liked to be led into, but I do not think anyone could blame him; I am very sorry about it."

"Well, I'm not," said Dillwyn. "If ever a man got his deserts in his life, it was Ambert. And how he took it, too." He laughed contemptuously. "Not a blow in return."

Elfrida coloured hotly.

"I didn't see. I didn't look," said Agatha. "It was terrible. I hope he wasn't hurt. You saw Lord Ambert going away, Dicky. How did he look?"

Mr. Browne considered, and then gave words to memory.

"Like a crushed strawberry," said he, with all the usual grace that belonged to him.

A little silence followed this, and then to everyone's surprise, and certainly to their relief—because they all wanted to laugh, too—Elfrida gave way to unmistakable mirth. To say she shook with laughter would hardly be an exaggeration. And there wasn't a touch of hysteria about it. It was a most honest exhibition of feeling, and to Agatha it occurred that there was actual joy in it.

Presently she felt a little ashamed and tried to explain herself away.

"Ah! but you should have seen how Mr. Blount looked," cried she. This was, however, the openest subterfuge. She certainly had not been thinking of Blount's appearance (which was altogether creditable considering the circumstances) when she laughed. Blount, indeed, had little awry with him, except a great and exceeding contentment in his whole air, and

a most unholy light in his clerical eye—and a torn collar.

She drew Agatha away presently into a little pretty snugger of green leaves, and laid her hands upon her arms. She was not laughing now. She was greatly agitated.

"It is all over. It is done. You were right, Agatha. I shall never marry him."

"You mean—Lord Ambert?" Agatha was so surprised and, indeed, so sceptical, that she could find nothing less bald to say.

"I mean that beast!" said Elfrida, who seldom studied the delicacies of the language—"that hateful coward!"

"You will break off with him? Elfrida, it will take courage."

"It will not take one moment," said Elfrida. "I shall be home in half-an-hour, it will take me five seconds to scribble a note, and twenty minutes after that I shall be free again"—she was evidently a person of resources. "Free!"—she extended her slender arms and smiled—"as air."

"I hope you are in earnest—that you mean it," said Agatha, gravely, "because he may make an unpleasantness about it."

"Ah, I'm so afraid he *won't*," said Elfrida.

This seemed conclusive. There was a distinct animus in her voice as she spoke of Ambert. Evidently she was longing to "show him up," as she herself would have put it.

Dicky Browne, coming up at this moment with Dillwyn—to Elfrida's disgust, who would have liked an

exhaustive conversation with Agatha—heard her and understood.

“It was a great run,” said Mr. Browne, with a beaming eye, alluding to the late encounter, “and full of pluck”—he glanced at Elfrida, but the pause was infinitesimal—“on one side. I’m glad I was in at the death.”

Elfrida’s engagement to Lord Ambert had been merely a few days’ business, and therefore many people were naturally supposed to have heard nothing at all about it. Mr. Browne, although he was staying with Mrs. Poynter, and had certainly had innumerable opportunities of learning a great deal about it, elected to know nothing. Elfrida had told him nothing, so he felt he had a free hand; and it would be such a chouse for that brute of an Ambert to be thrown over. Dicky had his good points—girls always said that; but undoubtedly he could be troublesome.

He sank upon the mossy bank next to Elfrida, whilst Dillwyn gladly accepted the opportunity to get beside Agatha. Agatha decidedly had the best of it. Mr. Browne was bent on teasing.

“I could see you looking on,” said he to Elfrida. “You clapped, didn’t you?”

“No,” said Elfrida. Her brows contracted. She felt so sorry for herself. She would have liked to enjoy the situation, but to make fun of her future lord—the man who was to have been her future lord—was beyond her. She rallied a little on this point, however. There wasn’t a man on earth after all who should lord it over *her*.

"Ah, you should," said Mr. Browne; "such a splendid performance. Pit and gallery rose to it."

"Where did you place me?" asked she, coldly. "Gallery?"

"And why not?" said he. "Isn't that the proper place for Ga—" But here Dillwyn interposed, cutting off Dicky's extremely low joke.

"I tell you what," said the latter, who really had no sense of decent feeling, and was not even now ashamed of himself, "I never felt so cheerful in my life as when Blount floored that fellow. When I saw him lying on the ground in a state of collapse, I fell upon my own neck with delight."

"You must have had very little to do," said Elfrida, tilting her chin. She was feeling anything but friendly towards him. "Why on earth can't he go away and take Dr. Dillwyn with him, and not interrupt people just when they are beginning to——to——"

"You see I so seldom have anything to do," said Mr. Browne blandly. He was now quite aware that she wanted to get rid of him, but could not resist the impulse to torment. "That's why I can always devote my time to my friends." He drew nearer to her, and cuddled himself up at her feet as if he had made up his mind to stay there for ever.

"Well! what happened?" asked Elfrida. As a rule she was equal to most occasions. Mr. Browne for probably the fifth time in his life was taken unawares.

"When?" asked he.

"When you fell on your own neck." Elfrida suppressed her smile. "Did you enjoy it?"

"'Twas poor — 'twas very poor," confessed Mr. Browne. "But what was to be done? If you —" he looked at Elfrida—"had been there—I could have had your neck to fall upon."

"Certainly you could not," said Elfrida, indignantly.

"What?" Mr. Browne's tone had taken a most reproachful cadence. "You mean to say you wouldn't have succoured me under such trying circumstances?"

"Under no circumstances!"

Perhaps she had looked to seeing him give way under this blow, but Mr. Browne came up smiling.

"Your cruelty lays it all plain," said he. "Surely it was most merciful, considering all things, that I had my own neck to fall back upon."

"I think your own neck must have been greatly surprised," said Elfrida, caustically.

"Why?" demanded Mr. Browne, regarding her with severity. "Do you think it was the first time it was subjected to such sweet assaults?"

"I'm sure of it."

"You seem very intimate with my neck," said Mr. Browne.

At this Elfrida rose.

"What do you mean, Dicky? I am thankful to say that I know very little of you or your neck."

"Then I'm sorry for you," said Mr. Browne, sadly. "You've been done out of a real good thing. I must make it up to you later on."

"Agatha, we ought to find Auntie, and go home," said Elfrida. She gave Dicky a short glance, but one

full of contempt. It seemed to delight him. She drew Agatha away with her.

"You are still steadfast?" asked Agatha, who was afraid she wasn't.

"Quite—quite." She paused, and then laughed below her breath. "How could I marry a crushed strawberry?" said she.

Agatha did not answer her, but she felt the frivolous Dicky had his uses.

As they came towards the party in general, they found it already on the move. Ill news flies apace, and some little tidings, some faint echoes in the air, had reached the others.

At all events Mrs. Greatorex, horrified, was sending in all directions for Agatha. Dr. Darkham was her messenger. These sudden scandals were so disgraceful. Would he go and look for Agatha? he who—

Indeed the little voice that stirs society circles was now quite awake. Something certainly was wrong, and society rose to the occasion. Society hates wrongs—when published!

The party broke up, not with apparent unity, yet simultaneously, and by degrees every one, with the sweetest, most unconcerned smile in the world, was asking for his or her barouche or landau or dogcart. Nobody knew anything. But everyone had at once noticed how dull the sky was looking (it was a brilliant azure, but providentially a little cloud lay in the south-east), and everyone said it would be so wise to get home as soon as possible.

Somebody outside the latest bulletin had suggested

vaguely that he would like to say good-bye to his host, but that tiresome somebody was hustled into a corner and carefully suppressed.

There was a last moment, however, when Agatha found herself alone with Dillwyn. The short, scrubby bushes were thick in this blessed spot, and whilst all those over there were standing in groups discussing in low tones the situation—gossiping gaily, but always in a careful underbreath, and saying the queerest things in the most ordinary language—Dillwyn and Agatha were virtually alone.

“That is all over, I fancy,” said Dillwyn, alluding to Elfrida’s engagement with Ambert.

“Yes, I think so. I am sure of it.”

“The best thing that could happen to her. Love alone makes marriage sacred.”

“And as for Ambert—he would not have made her happy.”

“I don’t believe he could make anybody happy. But don’t let us waste our time over him. We have only a moment——. When can I see you again?”

“To-morrow. By the river?”

“Yes. At four. Agatha! I hope you know how I feel about all this secrecy—how I detest it. It is always on my mind that our meetings will be discovered, and that on you the annoyance will fall. Every evening I picture you to myself sitting dolefully”—he tried to smile—“whilst Mrs. Greatorex scolds you. I would to heaven, my darling, I were a rich man—though I never cared for money till I saw you.”

“You mustn’t expect miracles,” said she tenderly;

"but somehow I feel sure it will all be right, and very soon, too. Aunt Hilda will give in—she cannot persist much longer—or else something will happen."

"That's rather Micawberish, isn't it? Well, we must wait, I suppose. But"—he kissed the palms of her pretty hands slowly, lingeringly—"waiting is hard."

CHAPTER XXXII.

My true love hath my heart, and I have his
By just exchange, one for the other given;
I hold his dear, and mine he cannot miss;
There never was a better bargain driven.

ELFRIDA stayed awake till twelve o'clock that night. A wonderful concession for her to any emotion. Then she went to bed and slept soundly until her maid next morning called her. Still, she was of such strength that the morning's thoughts did not necessarily affect those of the night before.

She had said last night she would not marry Ambert. She said the same thing to herself to-day, as she awoke from her slumbers.

She had not yet, however, said whom she *would* marry. Of course, she did not know. No doubt that question lay in the future.

Futures are sometimes very near!

She dressed herself and went down to the garden. She always rose early, and was in the habit of taking a little first breakfast in her own room. And now she found that the tiny cup of chocolate and its accompanying roll was as much as she cared for to-day.

To-morrow, no doubt, it would be different.

She strolled slowly here and there amongst the hollyhocks, that now were losing their excellence. But

presently, growing tired of them, she left the garden and strolled idly into the meadow beyond it, and, leaning her arms upon the stile, told herself it was lovely to be alone for once, and at this delightful hour, with not a single weight on her mind, not a creature in sight, and her engagement broken off!

Engagements were odious! Never would she submit to one again. They were demoralising—they betrayed distrust both in the man and woman. They meant waiting and waiting. Well, what did that mean? No! If ever she were to dream of marriage again there should be no waiting—that is, no engagement. Hateful word!

Suddenly a quick light grew within her eyes. Down there in the lower field, quite a quarter of a mile away, someone was walking quickly. A quarter of a mile is a long way for people to distinguish one person from another, but somehow Elfrida was equal to the occasion. She knew at once that the man down there trudging across that field was Tom. She always called him Mr. Blount to *people*, but to herself of late he had been Tom.

It suddenly occurred to her how absurd it was that Tom should be crossing that field down *there* without even knowing that she was *here*. And how often had she told herself that she would never be absurd! She thought a moment, and then this finished coquette drew a handkerchief from her pocket and held it aloft.

The breeze caught and swayed it most delicately to and fro, but it did not after all seem to be of much use. At all events the curate held his even way, and was now nearly across the field without having glanced once in its direction.

Elfrida was a person hard to beat. She now flung

down the handkerchief, and raised both her small white hands to her mouth.

“Coo-ee.”

The old Australian call came sweetly from her lips, and rang as such a sweet call should, straight to where it was meant to go.

The young man in the field below stood still, glanced to right and left, and then direct to the right.

Yes. She was there! It was she who had called him. He forgot old Mrs. Stringers, to whom he was going to pay an early parochial visit—he made it up to her on the double later on—and turning round went straight to Elfrida. But as he went his heart quailed. What was she going to say to him?

Was she angry about what had happened yesterday? Did she know? Of course, she knew; some one would be sure to tell her! And she was now going to forbid him her presence for the future—to cast him off.

Blount knew nothing of what had happened after he ran away yesterday from her displeasure. Now, as with a beating heart he drew near her, he asked himself had it been worth while. If only he had kept his temper, and let that fellow go—she might still——

But all at once he knew he was not sorry for what he had done. He was not repentant. He was glad he had licked that cur.

He was quite near, before he dared to look at her, and then his spirits went up with a bound.—*She had not heard then!*

She received him sweetly.

“Fancy your cutting me like that,” said she.

“Cutting you?”

"Well, yes—down there in the lower meadow. I waved my handkerchief to you, but, of course, one needn't see a thing unless one likes."

"I should have liked," said he. "But I didn't see."

"No? And then I called to you. You," with a glance from under her long lashes, "*had* to come then."

"You know very well," said he, with some reproach, "that I was only too glad to come."

She laughed a little, but she had the grace to blush; she stood opposite to him, with her pretty head held down, apparently watching her foot as it played with a pebble beneath it.

"What made you do that yesterday?" asked she at last, in a low tone.

She *did* know then! Blount's heart leaped. She knew and was not angry.

"Who told you?" asked he. "But that is outside the matter. I did it because it was what I was longing to do for months. Of course," slowly, "I could say I did it because he insulted me, but there's no good telling a lie about it."

"For months! And why?"

She was still watching the pebble.

Tom Blount paused.

"What's the good of your going on like that?" said he.

"Like what?" She looked up now for a moment.

"Pretending not to know."

"Know?"

"Well—if you will have it," said he desperately, "I half-killed that fellow because you had promised to

marry him, and—God forgive me—I'm not a bit sorry for it."

There was a short silence, then Elfrida looked straight at him—

"Neither am I," said she.

This astounding announcement from the bride-elect of the man he had just thrashed startled Blount into more immediate action.

"Then what on earth are you marrying him for?"

"Oh, that's all over," said Elfrida, airily.

"*What's over?*"

"My engagement to Lord Ambert. Didn't you know? I could not possibly marry a man who had been beaten—and beaten by *you!*"

"Your engagement—over?"

"Why, yes, yes," impatiently.

"You are free now?"

"I don't know," said she, softly. Her eyes were again on the ground.

Tom Blount looked at her. Was she in earnest? Did she mean it? An uncomfortable feeling that she might be playing with him was unnerving him.

"You don't believe it," she said. She could read him like a book, and perhaps (some books are beautiful) that was why she liked him. "It seems to me," petulantly, "that you don't *want* to believe it. And yet you tell me you half-killed that coward just because——"

"I loved you," said Blount.

"Ah!" She was not looking at the pebble now: she was looking at him. "You loved me *then*; I wonder—if you love me now."

"Elfrida!"

"You do?" She laughed again, so prettily, and held out to him her hand. He took it and held it fast. He found he could not speak; no words came to him. But he held her hand as though he would never let it go again. Elfrida was still laughing, but there were tears in her eyes.

"Why don't you kiss it?" she said, coquette to the last.

Tom Blount did not, however. His face was very white, but there was strength in his firm and tender mouth. He drew her to him.

"I will not kiss your hand unless I may kiss you," said he. "And I would not kiss you unless you said you would be my wife."

"Wouldn't you?" said Elfrida. All her old audacity had come back to her. She stood erect and looked at him defiantly. Her eyes sparkled; she did not, however, remove her hand from his grasp. It would have been difficult. "Very well, then, let me tell you that *I* wouldn't kiss *you* for anything you could offer—unless you said you would be my husband."

I don't think either of them knew which was the first. It was a simultaneous rush into each others' arms.

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She took him in to breakfast—she had recovered her appetite—and told Miss Firs-Robinson all about it on the spot. The servants providentially were out of the room, or I am sure she would have told them too.

Miss Firs-Robinson, who had refused to believe in

Elfrida's determination to break off her engagement with Ambert, was at first greatly upset. She marched to the window, turning her back upon Blount—it was beyond question the finest back in Europe—and there thrummed upon the panes for a minute or so. Then she came back.

"It is a blow—a blow," said she. "Your poor father meant you to be——"

"Happy!" said Elfrida. "And I shall be so happy with Tom and Tom with me. Won't you, Tom?" Blount had his arm round her in a moment. "And I couldn't bear Ambert, Auntie, could I now? And you couldn't bear him, either. Could you now?"

She left Blount's dear arms, and went to Miss Firs-Robinson, and slipped herself into her embrace.

"He was an earl!" said that old lady, in a distinct tone.

"He was a beast," said her niece, sweetly.

There seemed something definite about this. Miss Firs-Robinson let Elfrida recline upon her ample bosom, and Elfrida accepted the air cushion very gracefully. Peace with honour seemed to be restored, when all at once Miss Firs-Robinson spoke again. Her words were unpleasant, but she for the first time on this eventful morning addressed them to Blount, which of course was a good sign.

"Elfrida has a great deal of money," said she.

"I know," said Blount. He was feeling restive. "Why," said he, looking at Elfrida, "could you not endow a hospital or an orphanage, or——"

"Certainly not!" said Elfrida, abandoning the air cushion on the spot. "Why should we be uncom-

fortable just because we happen to love each other?" She ran to him. "I love you, and you love me, and Auntie——" she looked back and held out her hand to the old lady, "you love him too, don't you?"

"How can I tell?" said she.

"Well, at all events, you *hated* Ambert, didn't you now?"

Miss Firs-Robinson struggled with herself and then gave way. She burst into tears.

"Like poison, my dear," said she; "*like poison.*"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

But I am tied to very thee
By every thought I have;
Thy face I only care to see,
Thy heart I only crave.

ONE surprise makes many. The neighbourhood of Rickton had hardly recovered from its astonishment about the fact that Elfrida had thrown over Lord Ambert, and accepted the curate, when a still greater piece of news descended upon them.

Old Reginald Greatorex died on the very evening of the day that saw Elfrida's emancipation, and a letter two days later from his solicitors told Dillwyn that the old man had made him his heir. Dillwyn went down to the funeral, and heard the will read. It was all true. There were no near relations, and no entail. Reginald was at liberty to leave his property as he chose—and he chose now to leave Medlands and three thousand a year to the son of the woman who had been the one love of his life.

To Mrs. Greatorex he left ten thousand pounds, to her immense astonishment. She had expected nothing from him. It made her feel quite rich, and on the spot she forgave him all!

Dillwyn, on his return, had an early interview with her. He was determined to see her, even before seeing Agatha, though he wrote the latter an impassioned note

out of the fulness of his heart. Mrs. Greatorrex received him with open arms, and without a touch of embarrassment. He studied her, and found her wonderful. She told him in the frankest way that she had always liked him—nay, *loved* him; but, of course, he could see that Agatha must be considered. She had constituted herself her dear girl's guardian, and was it not her duty then to place her as well in life as possible? But that was all over now, of course; and her darling Agatha would be happy, and comfortable as well. "And really, you know, that Dr. Darkham was—well—not quite up to the mark, you know—*hardly* a gentleman."

Dillwyn felt he ought to have been disgusted. But he was too happy. He felt nothing except a wild desire for laughter, and after a struggle he gave way to it. He feared she might be offended, but she wasn't. She laughed, too—quite gaily—and patted his arm with her fan, and told him he was "a naughty boy." When he was going away she kissed him, and told him she was never so delighted in her life—she knew he was the only man in the world who could make her dearest girl happy.

"Her dearest girl" had only one moment then with her lover, but it was a rapturous one. He had to go off in a hurry to see old General Montgomery, who had had another slight attack last night, and who would allow no doctor but Dillwyn near him. He had chafed greatly at the young man's unavoidable absence during the past two days. However, he told her he would be back in an hour, and would she meet him in the wood?—they would be alone there. Of course she would.

When he was gone Mrs. Greatorex sent for Agatha. The girl quite expected that she would have said something about Jack, but there was no mention of him for some time: she dwelt largely on the difference the ten thousand pounds would make in her income, and then drifted off to Elfrida. She had behaved so wisely, she said.

"That is quite what I think," said Agatha. "She would have been wretched with Lord Ambert."

"Absolutely so."

"And wasn't it sweet of her to give him up—the title, the position, everything—for the sake of her love for Tom Blount?"

"It would, if it *had* been so. But, my dear Agatha, anybody with a brain could see that the girl quailed before the prospect held out to her."

"No wonder!" said Agatha, earnestly. "Such an odious man."

"My dear, it wasn't the man, it was the position that frightened her. A girl like that—of *no* family, whose people kept a *store*—to even *dream* of being a Countess was the most outrageous presumption. At the last, you see, she shrank from it; she felt she could not with any propriety wear a coronet. Her brows were not formed for it by nature. It"—solemnly—"would drop off. Now you, Agatha, you will be indeed a fitting mistress for——" She paused, and then said suddenly, "Medlands!"

Agatha sat and stared. Mrs. Greatorex beamed back at her. A stranger, looking in, would never have dreamed that Mrs. Greatorex had ever had other designs for Agatha than the marrying of her to Dr. Dillwyn.

"I think," said she, lightly, "you had better write a little line to Dr. Darkham——"

"I? No," said Agatha, with determination. She rose. "Why should I write to him?"

"My dearest, just a little word, to terminate that—er—unfortunate engagement."

"There was no engagement," said the girl, proudly, "except my engagement to Jack. I have had nothing to do with Dr. Darkham—nothing!"

"Well—very little, certainly," said Mrs. Greator. She smiled. "What a blessing," said she, "that you never encouraged him. He has hardly anything to complain of, really. Hardly *anything*. Tell Mary to put on her hat. I shall send him a little diplomatic, friendly line at once."

Under the trees it was charming, though many of them were now losing their leaves. Agatha and Dillwyn sat beneath a huge beech, and made sweet plans for their future. They felt so happy, and so alone. It was lovely to be alone, and to be able to say everything that came straight from their hearts without the necessity of whispering. Of course they could not tell that just behind them, kneeling in the shelter of a thick growth of young trees, was a man—a man whose face was the face of a devil at that moment.

They discussed all their happy plans. They arranged that they would live at Medlands, and they named the day for their wedding. There was nothing to grieve them in old Reginald's death. Dillwyn had known him but very slightly, and gratitude was the principal feeling he had for him.

"I feel as if I ought to be sorry for him," said he with a little self-reproach. "But somehow I can feel nothing, but that I can claim you now before the world."

"I was yours whether the world knew it or not," said she.

"I know. I know. . . . Mrs. Greatorex has written to Darkham?"

"Yes; immediately after you left. He knows by this time that even a question of an engagement is at an end."

"Presumptuous brute," said Dillwyn.

The man behind smiled. There was a look on his face as though he were jotting down something in his memory.

Dillwyn looked at his watch, and suddenly sprang to his feet.

"By Jove," said he, "it's just two."

"Well, but that is very early," in an aggrieved tone.

"Too early," with disgust. "But that poor old fellow is very unstrung, and begged me to go back at two."

"The General?"

"Yes. I'll pull him through, I think; but he is very shaky and nervous. I am going to sleep there to-night."

"Are you? Oh, I'm glad," said Agatha, quickly.

"Glad! Why?"

"I don't know,"—she hesitated. "Don't despise me for it, Jack; but I do dread that horrible man, Dr. Darkham. Sometimes I think he is mad. However, at General Montgomery's you will be safe."

Dillwyn laughed gaily, and caught her to him, and kissed her.

"What a dear and lovely baby!" said he.

"There, go—go!" said she. She gave him the prettiest of little shoves, and then pulled him back to her. "Promise me you will think of me every moment, from this until we meet again."

"Promise! To promise *that*, indeed! Ask me something difficult. Ask me to forget you for even *half* a moment."

"As if I should ask you that! Oh, darling, *darling* Jack," throwing herself into his ready arms. "I'm *too* fond of you, and that's the fact."

"Sweet fact," said he.

They kissed and kissed, and when they reached the entrance to the wood they kissed again and parted.

Darkham, kneeling there in his purgatory, had seen and heard everything—the lovers' dalliance, the soft blushes, the glad embraces. . . . On such and such a day they were to be married. All their young lives were to be a dream of joy!

When they were gone he fell prone upon the earth—with his face to it; and so lay long without moving.

Then he raised himself and got slowly to his feet. He looked round him for a moment vaguely, as though earth and sky and place were strange to him. Then he turned and ran, crashing wildly through brambles and bracken and furze, as though there was a fiend out of hell pursuing him. . . . Perhaps there was.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

By heaven! I'm tottering on the very brink
Of ruin, and thou art all the hold I've left.

It was the evening of the same day. Daylight was fading fast, and overhead dull clouds and sullen were scurrying to and fro, dimming the glory of the heavens.

A clock somewhere struck five, and Darkham suddenly heard it. It seemed to wake him from his frightful dream—a dream in which he had been walking—walking always—he did not know where.

Now as he looked up he knew. He stood at the gate of General Montgomery's avenue!

How odd that he should be here. Had thoughts of Dillwyn led him unconsciously to dog his steps? He heard the voices of the gatekeeper's children quarrelling within. They must have been so quarrelling a minute ago. Yet *then* he had not heard them.

He opened the gate and went in. The place was familiar to him. How often he had been here attending on the old man until this Dillwyn came. He went slowly onwards into the deeper twilight of the trees. How cool it was; how green, how quiet. He took off his hat and let his forehead bathe itself in the dewy stillness.

When he came close to the house he stopped short.

Masons were hurrying in and out of one of the side doors, and a ladder lay against a wall that led to an upper window. He had heard that some improvements were being made in the house, which was a hideous structure, but he had imagined they would have been put back by the General's illness. That ladder—why, up there was the room in which the old man used to sleep.

Presently a mason came out the house and towards the spot where he was standing. Darkham, who was quite himself again, felt a little ashamed of being discovered here without any purpose. Going quickly forward, he met the man halfway.

"Surely you are not working here, when the General is so ill," he said, in a tone of polite surprise.

"No, sir. We've just got our orders to do no more for some days. We're collecting our tools, that's all; and are off to another job."

"I see."

"The General's main bad, I'm told. The doctor's just come and gone. He—you know him—Dr. Dillwyn, is sleeping here to-night it seems, if you can call it sleeping when he only gets two hours."

"How two hours."

"Well, I don't know, sir. But that's how it is. I heard the servants talking. And mighty poor rest it seems to me for a man that's toiling all day. I suppose he'll be up with the old gent the rest of the night. He wouldn't have another thing done to that window either," pointing to the window against which the ladder lay, "although he is sleeping in that room, and the

lower sash is out, as you can see. Seems he always sleeps with the window open."

The mason seemed a garrulous fellow. Darkham nodded to him as a dismissal, and he moved away. Just as he was turning the corner, however, Darkham called to him.

"You are leaving your ladder."

"Yes, sir. Hope to be back again shortly, and ladder'll do no harm."

"No, of course not, unless the doctor objects—he's sleeping in that room, you say."

"Why, bless you, the ladder can't harm him."

"True. Especially when he has only got two hours to endure it." Darkham laughed pleasantly. "I hope they will be early ones at all events."

"Twelve to two," Maria says. Not so early, either." It was plain that the mason was keeping company with Maria.

Darkham nodded again, and when the mason was out of sight turned and went home. As he walked he thought. And ever his thoughts grew clearer, more concentrated. Somehow he could not take his mind off that ladder! It would be so easy to climb it; to enter by the open window—to—

He stopped still and ran his hand across his brow. It was wet! What a warm evening it was! And how long it had lasted. Could it be possible it was still the evening of the day that told him Agatha was gone from him for ever—that his soul was lost to all eternity!

He put his hand inside his coat, and brought out a

letter. It was the "little, diplomatic, friendly line" that Mrs. Greatorrex had sent him. He read it through again, although he knew it by heart, and when he had finished it his face was not good to look upon.

So!——He drew in his lip, and, slowly, his fingers tightened on the note until they had crushed it into a mere rag.

For the past few weeks he had lived largely on Mrs. Greatorrex's promises to help him. He had believed in her promises about the coercion of Agatha. To-day he knew what her promises were worth. The moment fortune flung itself at his rival's feet, she had gone over to that rival's side! He had made sure of her as an ally, but she had failed him in his need. She had merely used him. He—Darkham—would have done, if no other eligible suitor had come forward. Suddenly the despised Dillwyn had become eligible, and there was an end of all her professions of friendship. He had been a dupe—that only!

There was a second sting in the matter, too, and it went deep, and burned like fire into the man's soul. Eligibility in the matter of money had had nothing to do with this insulting casting aside of him and his pretensions to the hand of Agatha. He was at this moment a far richer man than Dillwyn, but Mrs. Greatorrex had put all that aside, as if it were not to be considered. She preferred that her niece should marry a gentleman with three thousand a year, rather than a *nobody* with five. She had not *said* that in the "diplomatic friendly" effusion. She had not so much as *hinted* at it, yet she had managed to convey her meaning all the same.

The little delicately-written, perfumed missive was full of it!

He tore it into a thousand pieces and flung it on the ground, and trampled it under his heel. She had befooled him. *Curse her!* But he would be even with her yet. He would deal with her—later on—after—....

The oath he had sworn was dear to him. He had told Agatha that rather than see her married to Dillwyn he would destroy him! Well!

He began to walk again, and more rapidly. That first wild thought had now taken possession of him. It fascinated him to an extraordinary degree. He could not take his mind off that ladder; with his eyes open he seemed to see it. It went along the road before him, now here, now there, with the sashless window at the top of it.

He turned in the direction of the Red House. He hated going home, feeling a longing in him to walk and walk, thinking all the time, and with no slightest sense of fatigue. But it would be necessary to put in an appearance there. He feared lest, with what lay before him, his absence at dinner to-day might be noticed by the servants.

Yes, he would go back and to bed at the usual hour; and so on. The ordinary routine should be carried out. Afterwards, when the household was quiet, he could slip out through the library window. He told himself he must be careful to upset the bed-clothes on his return—perhaps, however, it would be better to do so before starting. He pondered a little while on this,

seeing how it would look in case of accident of any sort—one entering his room in his absence, for example.

He laid his plans very carefully. It would take—first—so long to get from here to The Cedars, to mount the ladder, to enter the open window, to—— it would not take long to do *that!*—and then so much time to get back again, to see to his clothes—the spots, the stains.

It seemed quite feasible, quite safe. The night promised to be very dark—and, besides, who would be there at that hour? He ran the whole thing over again in his mind. There was the ugly old house, and the ladder against the window sill, and the lower sash removed. The mason had said Dillwyn liked to sleep with his window open, but even if a fancy caught him to-night to close it, he couldn't do it—the sash was removed.

A sharp and uncontrollable fit of laughter shook him. It was noticeable, however, that he did not laugh aloud. He swayed violently from side to side with convulsive mirth, but no sound escaped him. Even whilst he wiped his eyes and mouth he looked fearfully around him, as though suspicious of someone being near to see him. But no one was.

It was all so comfortably arranged for him. He felt he owed Dillwyn a debt of gratitude for the ladder and the open window. What a truly Christian trust in Providence he showed, sleeping thus, at the mercy of all men! He shook anew with his horrible merriment. What a gay bridegroom he would look to-morrow. The early morning light would touch up his face—or *what*

remained of it! To-morrow! Agatha had studied him. No doubt she knew all her lover's looks by heart. He—Darkham—had watched her—had seen her smiles, her kisses. Death and hell!—what memories! Well—well—well—to-morrow she should see a new look on her lover's face—a fresh expression—one she had never seen before.

CHAPTER XXXV.

"Neither the sun nor death can be looked at steadily!"

DARKNESS had fallen and covered all the land. The wind was sighing heavily, and no star appeared upon the heavens' breast.

Night, that great shadow and profile of day, was here; day itself had been long time dead.

Through the dense shadow of the trees Darkham was hurrying swiftly, stealthily. Sometimes when a little open patch came he ran, but always he made great haste. He was evidently in a hurry.

The darkness was nothing to him; he knew every inch of the way—he had traversed it a hundred times—and darkness was essential to his plans: he welcomed it. Light would have hampered him. How could his purpose be accomplished beneath the pure glory of a saintly moon!

A loose sweeping branch met him, and cut him across the face a swinging blow. He staggered backwards, but then pressed more determinedly forward and caught the offending branch and broke it into twenty pieces. He felt no pain. When he had broken it he cast it aside impatiently and went on with even increasing speed.

A little time had been lost on that branch—he must make up for it.

He went as lightly as a young girl at her first dance! He seemed to tread on air. He was apparently filled with a high state of exultation. His desire pushed him onwards—the desire to be *there*—to be *over him*—to be looking down upon his enemy, sleeping, helpless—to gloat a bit. . . . Oh! he would wait—he would look on the blissful slumber filled with dreams of *her*; and then to stab—and stab—and *stab*.

He trembled with delight at the picture he drew. There was no flaw in it. He felt no remorse, no dread of miscarriage of his project, no fears of any sort. No, not one, not ——.

Suddenly, he stood still, and listened. *Again!*

It was the second time he had heard that sound, or fancied he had heard it. A dull unplaceable sound, yet one that suggested itself to him as the footsteps of a person following.

Once before he had stopped to listen, but nothing came of it, except the heavy sougning of the wind in the trees as the storm swept over them. No sound but that. Yet all through his hurried walk in the wood, it had seemed to him that that sound lay behind him, as though some strange thing was haunting him.

Imagination no doubt! A sharp return of a branch to its place as he rushed by. The cracking of a rotten stem—one of the thousand sounds that wake the night.

He went on again, moving cautiously, yet with great speed. When was man in more hot haste to achieve his purpose? Every now and then he thrust his hand into his inner pocket, and there felt for something, and patted it with a curious affection. After each such

movement his pace seemed to grow greater; at last he began to run.

On, on, on, through the dark night. And now at last there was an opening in the wood; and there lay the road, and right across it the gate that led to The Cedars.

As he passed the edge of the wood, almost as his foot was on the road, he started. He looked back. The murky shadows of the wood told him nothing; but—*that sound*. Again that sound! He could have sworn he heard footsteps!

A sudden fear caught him; he turned, and rushed back into the wood, crashing to right and left of him. If he was followed, why, his purpose would be at an end; but he swore to himself, as he rushed here and there, that if he caught the man who had circumvented him, he would kill him on the spot.

He hurried here and there, thrashing the branches as he went, and destroying the lower growths—trampling mercilessly upon everything in the darkness, striking out with both arms, yet without sound of voice.

Then his fury abated. He grew suddenly quite quiet. There was nothing after all—nothing.

He wiped his brow and went on.

He tried the latch of the gate, but it was locked. He cared nothing for small obstructions like that. He climbed it easily enough, and went on down the avenue.

As he drew near the house, for the first time fear rose within his heart. But it was a fear that would have made the angels weep.

Was the ladder there? Or had one of the workmen taken it away?

He ran frantically to the break in the laurels from which the house could be seen.

A subdued shout of triumph broke from him.

The ladder was there!

He thrust his hand for the last time into his pocket, and felt the knife, and fondled it. Then he went on.

He reached the ladder, put his foot on it and mounted. He began to climb quickly, yet with a dogged determination to make no mistake. There should be no false step.

When he was half-way up he looked down. Beneath was an area that surrounded the whole house. An area lately cemented. It was broad, and white and clean. In the darkness it made a sort of light.

He turned his eyes from that and looked up. The window above was open; wide open—the sash had not been replaced.

His heart began to beat madly. Now, *now*, was his enemy delivered into his hands.

He mounted still higher. The sill was almost within his reach; he put out his hand to grasp it, but it fell short. Another rung or two, and then—

Suddenly he made a lurch forward and clung to the ladder. Great heavens, what had happened? The ladder was swaying to and fro. He made a quick rush upwards and put out his hand to grasp the ledge of Dillwyn's window—but he was still too low for that.

The ladder was swaying heavily from side to side; it was now almost on the very edge of the sill. Soon it would be over. Something from below must be dragging it—dragging——

He made a last frantic dash at the sill—*and missed it.*

Again the ladder swayed, this time *towards* the desired sill. Darkham braced himself for a last effort. He made a dash and sprang on to the sill of Dillwyn's room.

That precipitated the end. The ladder reaching the edge, toppled over and went with a crash to the cemented area below.

Darkham, clutching on to the sill, saw the fall of the ladder. That meant death unless help came soon; and who was to give him help? *The man he had come to murder?*

He clung on desperately, his nails working into the hard stone. If he shouted, Dillwyn would hear him, would rescue him; but even at this last moment his hatred of Dillwyn held him dumb.

His fingers were growing tired—his nails were wearing away, and loosening. . . . In a moment they would come to the edge, and then——

Mad despair was in his heart. He clung desperately to the sill! A minute—could he hold on another minute? There was only a minute left. Was it so far to fall? Death, rather than an appeal to his rival. So far the strength of the man held out.

But now his nails were loosening; his eyes, mad with fear, sought the ground below.

He looked—and *looked*—and all at once a fearful yell broke from him.

What was that thing down there—crouching—with that white cloth over her mouth? Had she come—*was she waiting for him?*

Great God! have mercy!

His fingers gave way. He fell with a sickening scream on to the hard cement below.

There was a hideous thud.

That awful yell had wakened Dillwyn from his sleep—a sleep that would have been death but for it. He sprang up, and rushed to the open window, but too late!

He caught a vague, awful vision of one falling—falling through the air into eternity—but that was all.

It was enough, however; he lit a lamp, and rushed downstairs to the front of the house. There he lowered the lamp and looked about him. Nothing! nothing to be seen. He stepped down from the avenue on to the newly-cemented area that ran round the house, and looked about him with an anxious gaze. Suddenly he found he was stepping on a little crimson line that ran towards him sluggishly.

With a sharp ejaculation he stepped aside. A cold chill ran through him. All at once he knew that it was blood.

Then he went on, following up the red line until he came to——

Darkham was lying on the pavement, smashed almost out of recognition, yet still alive. Dillwyn knew that by the convulsive twitching of the fingers.

A figure was bending over him. Dillwyn at once saw it was the idiot, and even as he watched, the unhappy creature bent lower and laid a white cloth over the dying man's nose and mouth, pressing it down with a demoniacal force.

Dillwyn hurried forward, calling aloud as he came;

but the idiot crouching over Darkham could not hear. At last he reached them and flung himself upon the wretched boy, and tore him from his prey.

The idiot grappled with him in a sort of frenzy, but Dillwyn held on. The lamp threw a dull light upon the dying man's face—but above them and around was gloom.

All at once the idiot desisted from his struggles; he pointed frantically to Darkham.

Dillwyn followed his gaze. Darkham had risen on his elbow—it was the last effort before death. Dillwyn went to him and laid his arm round him, but Darkham pushed him back. Yet it seemed to the younger man that though Darkham's hatred of him followed him to the grave, his last thoughts were not of him.

The dying man lifted his hand and pointed it slowly, solemnly at his son—the son who sat opposite to him, laughing in his dying face. There was some awful meaning in Darkham's glazing eyes, as though he saw something beyond the idiot—something so horrible that it *kept* him alive in spite of nature. He struggled forward as though to address *someone*—someone Dillwyn could not see—but the struggle was too much for him, and he fell back. . . Dillwyn caught him in his arms—he was dead.

A great shout rose from the idiot.

“Sho! Sho! Sho!” yelled he.

His mother was avenged.

THE END.

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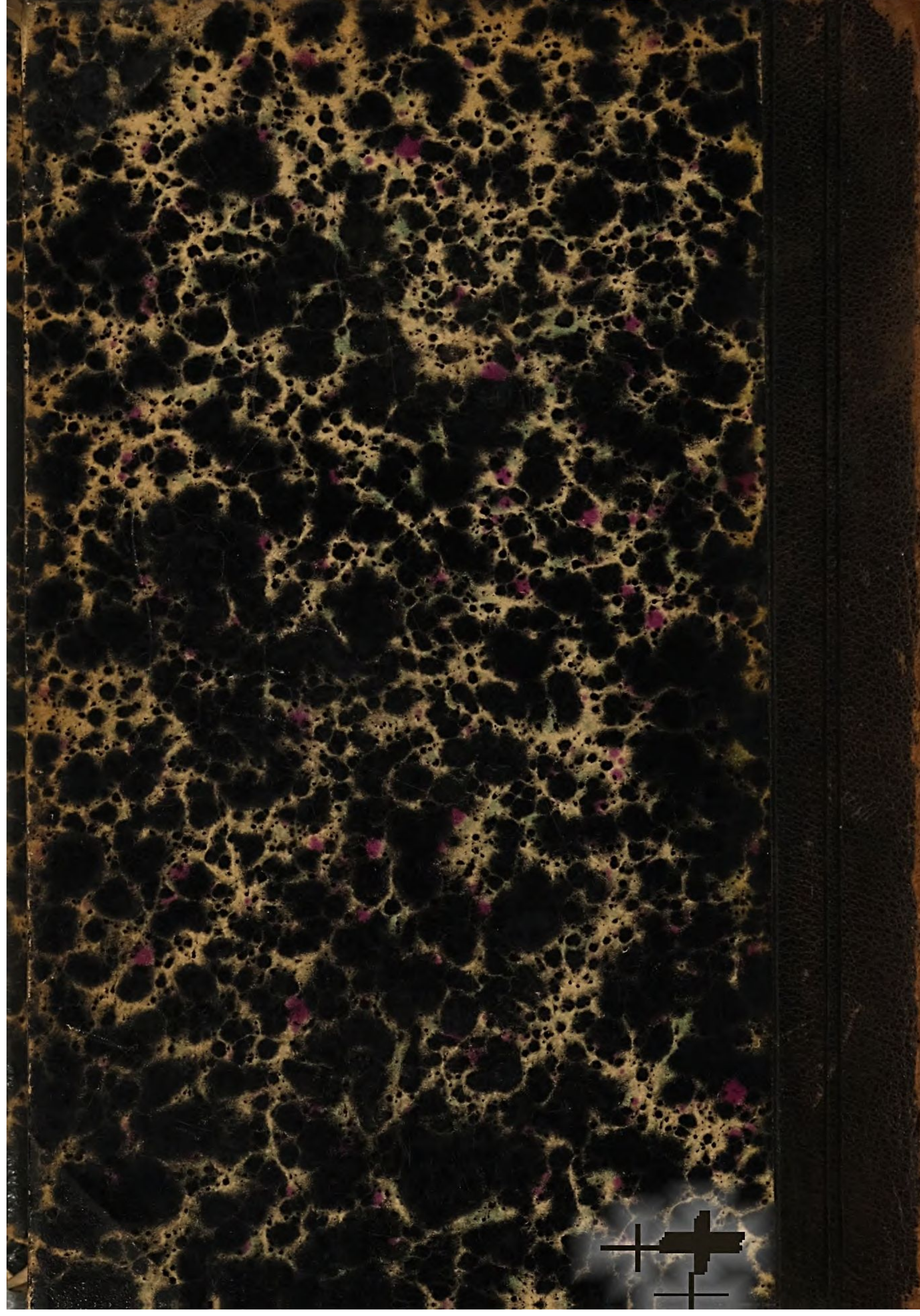
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